

The Echoes of that News Ring Loud

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The Echoes of that News Ring Loud

by [Scarlet_Gryphon](#)

Summary

Nie Mingjue never wanted to say goodbye.

Nie Huaisang never got to say goodbye.

One desperate choice leads to a thousand new ones.

(Or, the Nie brothers save the cultivation world [and themselves] through time travel, unlikely allies, and adopting far too many martial siblings.)

Notes

This is my first long-form foray into this fandom, and I am *very* excited to share this fic with everyone. I have a love for the Nie brothers and their relationship with one another, especially after seeing *Fatal Journey* and getting buried under a mountain of feels. This is my love letter to them as well as to my adoration for time-travel fix-its with unlikely travelers. Enjoy and please let me know what you think!

It was also inspired by this beautiful fandom music video [here](#). I highly encourage you to go watch it.

I've got you, brother



~Before~

Pain wracked Nie Mingjue's body as the *qi* deviation ripped its way through his body, his saber growing increasingly heavy in his hands as he swung at the ghostly images of the man he had once considered a brother (and, perhaps, something *more* before everything had happened). Jin Guangyao's taunting words echoed loudly in his ears, nearly drowning out Nie Huaisang's pleas for Nie Mingjue to stop. Blood stung Nie Mingjue's eyes, coating the world in a haze of rapidly darkening red. He could feel his once-formidable strength quickly failing him, and as he sank to his knees, his last coherent thought was that he deeply regretted leaving Nie Huaisang alone to face such a treacherous world.

~Between~

Warm darkness enveloped Nie Mingjue, cradling him in the kind of effortless comfort he hadn't experienced since he was a child. He reveled in it, luxuriating in the freedom from pain and suffering. He knew it was selfish, especially given all the strife in the world he'd left behind, but there wasn't much he could do now that he was dead. Nie Mingjue had always expected he'd die young; he just hadn't expected it would be at the hand of a friend.

As he drifted, Nie Mingjue's thoughts went to his brother. Nie Huaisang was nowhere near ready to be a sect leader, and Nie Mingjue laid the blame for that squarely at his own feet. He should've pressed him harder, though maybe in a way that would've suited his brother's gentler personality better. Or perhaps he should've found a better role for his brother. Maybe... Maybe a scholar? Or perhaps one of the senior administrative staff? Wars and sects didn't just run on warriors, after all.

It was far past the time to worry about that now, though. Nie Huaisang would have to learn how to be the best sect leader he could on his own. The journals of past sect leaders would be made available to him, and Nie Mingjue could only hope that Nie Huaisang would take what he needed from them and lead their sect towards a brighter future.

Time passed, though Nie Mingjue couldn't say how long it took before the warm darkness solidified around him. It almost felt like he was laying on a bed, a comfortable bolster pillow under his head and soft and warm blankets draped over him. As he lay there, Nie Mingjue focused on what else his senses were telling him. He could hear the gentle creak of the building around him, could smell the faint scents of pine and rock dust that came with being in Qinghe, and felt the quiet warmth of his golden core in his chest.

That alone had him opening his eyes, blinking a few times before the roof above him came into clear view. Nie Mingjue stared up at the achingly familiar sight, his sluggish brain taking several long moments before it fully registered what he was seeing. He sat up sharply, the blankets pooling around his waist as he looked around. He was in his childhood bedroom. Baxia was in her usual stand nearby, though the link to her spirit was not as robust as Nie Mingjue was used to after wielding her for over a decade.

He pushed his blankets back and then got to his feet, stumbling and then falling to his knees after managing maybe three steps at the most. Nie Mingjue stared down at his hands, fingers curling against the thin rug that covered the wood floor. They were too small, too unblemished by time, fights, and work to be the ones he died with. He took in a sharp breath and then another and another, his mind whirling. Was this the afterlife? Had he been reincarnated into a descendant of the Nie clan?

Nie Mingjue pushed himself to his feet and staggered over to the side table that served as his nightstand, looking into the polished bronze bowl of water that sat there. He touched his face- and it was *his*, not some unknown person's -fingers trembling. He was thirteen, fourteen at the most, with dredges of baby fat still clinging to his jawline. He'd really only hit a growth spurt at fifteen, puberty hitting him like a runaway horse and burning away the soft lines of childhood.

Was this a dream? Figments of his dying mind? Or was this the afterlife, somewhere to wait and relive his best and calmest days until his soul was ready to be reborn into the cycle anew? He supposed that not having to worry about war while in the afterlife was a welcome idea, but Nie Mingjue couldn't help but feel that wherever he was wasn't what came after death.

The sound of his bedroom door sliding open had Nie Mingjue turning from his wash basin, eyes widening when he saw the familiar form of his little brother in the dim pre-dawn light.

“Huaisang?”

Nie Huaisang froze like a rabbit in the middle of the doorway before stepping through and closing the door behind him. Quick footsteps saw him crossing the room and then launching himself into his brother's arms with a low, familiar cry.

“*Da-ge!*”

~Before~

Nie Huaisang looked over the array one last time, pushing back a lock of hair that had escaped from its confines as he sat back on his heels. He was tired, but if this worked... He sighed. If it worked, he'd be able to see his brother one last time. It'd be worth the pain and the heartache, surely.

“Nie-*zongzhu*, are you sure about this? W-what if it doesn't work?”

Nie Huaisang looked up at his eternally young companion, a tired smile quirking up one corner of his mouth that didn't last long. “It's been a long time since I've been a sect leader, Wen-*gongzi*. I'm just plain old Nie Huaisang now.” He huffed out a humorless laugh. “Old. You know, I never thought I'd get to say that? I'm older than even my father was when he died.”

“You're not *that* old.”

“Wen Ning, I'm almost sixty-five. That is very rare in my family. The last time any of the direct male bloodline reached that age was...” Nie Huaisang tipped his head back, thinking. “My great-great-great grandfather, and that's only because he lost his sword arm in a battle and couldn't fight again.”

Wen Ning nodded, fidgeting with the fabric of his clothes. If anyone looked at him now, they certainly wouldn't be able to connect him to the feared Ghost General at first glance. Nie Huaisang was grateful for his presence. It was nice to have a friend, especially one who understood what he'd gone through to get to where he was. Wen Ning was one of the last surviving members of their small group from their year at Cloud Recesses besides Nie Huaisang himself.

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had passed away in a battle against several uncommonly strong resentful spirits some years back, with Wei Wuxian standing in a red-eyed guard over his husband's body as the spirits overwhelmed the two of them. Jiang Cheng was still alive and ruling as sect leader in Lotus Pier, though word was he'd soon be handing that title off to his eldest son. Everyone else was either dead or scattered across the land, too involved in their own lives to bother checking up on the once-famed Head Shaker, and Nie Huaisang was perfectly fine with that.

“Besides,” he continued on as he got to his feet, grimacing at the complaints his knees sent up from kneeling too long, “if it doesn't work, then I'll simply be dead. Better to die that way than from *qi* deviation or some sort of other horrific manner. It'll be like I simply fell asleep. Maybe in my next life, I'll be a bird of some kind. I think I'd like that.”

Wen Ning hesitated, the shift in his posture drawing Nie Huaisang's eye. “Something you want to say?”

“I...” Wen Ning shifted his weight from foot to foot before continuing on. “Would... would the array be able to handle more than one person?”

Nie Huaisang paused as he considered the question. The array was meant to work with spiritual energy, flinging the consciousness of the person using it back to a peaceful time in their life to say goodbye to loved ones. The notes he'd found hadn't specified if it was meant to just be used with the energy from a golden core or not, so theoretically he supposed the resentful energy within Wen Ning could power it equally as well.

“It's possible,” he said finally. “It doesn't say how many people should use it at one time, and it's large enough to fit two people. Are you sure about this?”

Wen Ning nodded, his stiff features not quite able to hold the sad smile that his eyes reflected. “Yes. I would like to be able to say goodbye to *jiejie* one last time before I go to my final and permanent rest.”

Nie Huaisang stepped into the array and held out his hand to Wen Ning. The fierce corpse took it and allowed himself to be drawn into the array, being careful where he stepped. Nie Huaisang gently squeezed Wen Ning's hand once before dropping it. He produced an obsidian dagger from a sleeve, cut both of their left palms, and then clasped Wen Ning's hand once more wound-to-wound.

Blood mixed with resentful energy and *qi* dripped down onto the central figure of the array. The array immediately illuminated, the harsh light throwing sharp shadows on their faces. Magic surged over and around them, engulfing them in its swirling energy. The last thing Nie Huaisang saw was the peaceful expression on Wen Ning's face before darkness overtook the two of them.

~Between~

Nie Huaisang startled awake, his blankets slipping off his body and onto the floor with a dull *fwump* of cloth. His heart was pounding and his golden core trembling below his navel. He paused and then pressed a hand against his torso over his lower *dantian*, surprised to find that there was indeed a golden core there. That... That wasn't right. His core hadn't formed until he was late in his teens, far older and far weaker than his compatriots' had. Had it come back with him?

The array was meant to only send back his spirit and nothing else, so to have his core come back as well was startling. That... that could change things. He frowned, fingers drumming against his stomach. If his core had come back with him, then maybe the effects of array weren't as temporary as he'd expected. Or perhaps the mixture of *qi* and resentful energies had changed it just enough to be a permanent time travel array than a temporary one.

Nie Huaisang got up from his bed, unknowingly mirroring his brother as he stumbled and fell to his knees. The bed was certainly higher than he remembered. He stared down at his hands. Those were far smaller than he remembered as well. Just how old *was* he?

He looked around the room. No saber sitting in a stand collecting dust, and those... He pushed himself to his feet, steadying himself on his bed before going over to the table in the corner. Those were some of the first fans he'd painted on his own, crude, childish things that lacked the artistry of his later works. He received his first blank fan and paintbrushes when he'd turned eight, a gift from one of his tutors in an attempt to start teaching him one of the Six Arts.

So... He was at least eight. That... That was a start. Nie Huaisang turned away from his table, mind whirling. If he was eight, then...

His eyes widened. So was Wei Wuxian. He'd be living on the streets of Yiling at that very moment. If they could save him before Jiang Fengmian did, then perhaps Jiang Cheng wouldn't feel like he was being usurped as the favored son. It was also possible that Wei Wuxian's brilliance could solve the long standing issue of the Nie sect's saber spirits. If anyone could figure it out, it was Wei Wuxian.

After all, the man had already been delving into theories behind resentful energy and spirits at age fifteen. If he was given the time and resources to truly research it within a sect who'd been plagued by it for centuries, then perhaps a solution could be found. The possibilities swam around in Nie Huaisang's mind like koi in a pond that were about to be fed, pushing to the surface and demanding his attention in quick succession.

He shook his head, trying to redirect his focus. One thing at a time. Such research could take years, and there were many more important problems to solve. The issue of Wen Ruohan and the Yin Iron, for one. The sooner he was disposed of, the better. That would take careful consideration and planning, as it would also necessitate taking out Wen Xu and Wen Chao, as those two were as equally ruthless as their father, even if they were still children at the moment. Though perhaps...

No. That would have to wait as well. If they killed the heirs first, then Wen Ruohan would seek retaliation. If they killed Wen Ruohan first, then there would likely be some power grabbing within the sect as people tried to either claim the title of sect leader as their own through their bloodlines or wipe out the more immediate threats of Wen Xu and Wen Chao. The Dafan Wens, Wen Qing, and Wen Ning would have to be protected, though, since they had nothing to do with anything Wen Ruohan was planning.

Nie Huaisang rubbed at his temple with one hand. He'd have to make a list of all the important changes and then rank them in order of importance. High on that list would be finding Wei Wuxian. Maybe being in a different sect this time around would help him flourish without suppressing everything that made him *him*. Only time would tell.

He let his hand drop. Right. It was still late- a check out the nearest window showed the pale gray of pre-dawn -and the rest of the household would still be asleep. He would have enough time to check on his brother before coming back to his room to make plans.

Nie Huaisang quietly slipped out of his room, not bothering to take a candle or other light source with him. He knew the way to his brother's room like the back of his hand, so it took him barely any time at all to creep his way down the hall and then find the correct room. His brother wouldn't have been moved out of his room yet, or so he hoped. If he hadn't been, then their father was still alive or had just died, but-

No. He couldn't think of that right now. The hurt was old and dull, and Nie Huaisang wasn't about to let it flare up again. He reached out and cautiously slid the door open, intending to sneak in, take a peek at his sleeping brother's face, and then creep back out again without him being any the wiser. He certainly wasn't expecting to hear his brother's youthful voice calling out to him in hushed surprise.

“Huaisang?”

Nie Huaisang froze just as he was about to step into the room, his stomach lurching. He'd longed to hear his brother speak his name again for far too many years, and now that he had, he wasn't sure what to do. His body took over from his mind, forcing him to go through the automatic motions of entering the room, shutting the door, and then all but sprinting over to his brother. Nie Huaisang flung his arms around Nie Mingjue's torso, eyes brimming with tears as the two of them embraced.

“*Da-ge!*”

~Now~

The brothers clung to one another, Nie Huaisang crying as quietly as he could manage into the thin fabric of Nie Mingjue's sleep shirt. Nie Mingjue ran his hand along his brother's back over and over, trying to comfort him and not panic at the same time.

“Did you have a bad dream, *didi*?” he asked, keeping his voice soft and gentle. Nie Huaisang shook his head but the tears didn't stop, and as they stood there, Nie Mingjue realized that the tears weren't those of fear- something which would've had his brother wailing and chattering about what had scared him -but rather born of the silent and all-encompassing twins of grief and relief. He guided Nie Huaisang over to his bed, the two of them curling up on the mattress with a minimum amount of adjustment.

Nie Huaisang held onto his brother, his tears eventually petering out into the occasional hitched breath or soft snuffle. Nie Mingjue continued his soothing motions, both out of a need to calm his brother and out of the sheer fact that he was able to actually touch and hold the biggest piece of his heart once more. He wondered if this meant that Nie Huaisang was dead as well, and immediately every part of him was vehemently protesting the idea. No. His brother was alive and well and probably getting into all sorts of mischief among the living, just like always.

“It worked. I can't believe it *worked*.”

Nie Mingjue tore himself away from his thoughts, startled by Nie Huaisang's murmurs.

“Worked? What worked?”

Nie Huaisang went still save for his fingers flexing against his brother's chest. “It's nothing.”

“Huaisang, that wasn't *nothing*,” Nie Mingjue chided, the faintest hint of the deep rumble his voice would one day hold backing his words. He nudged his brother back enough to be able to see his face in the rapidly increasing light of the new day. “Now, what worked?”

“I don't- It was nothing. Just part of my dreams.”

Nie Mingjue stared at him, waiting patiently. Without his fans to distract and pull attention away, Nie Huaisang's face was a study in conflict. Nie Mingjue reached up and carefully wiped away the drying tear tracks that wound down his brother's cheeks, Nie Huaisang leaning into the gentle touch like a content cat.

“Then tell me about your dreams,” Nie Mingjue continued on. “What woke you up so early that you had to come check on me?” He laughed quietly. “You never wake before dawn if you have the choice. You'd sleep in until midday if we let you.”

“*Da-ge*,” Nie Huaisang whined, nose scrunching. Nie Mingjue grinned. He'd almost forgotten how cute his brother was at this age.

“It's true and you know it,” Nie Mingjue said. “Talk to me, Huaisang. Please?”

Nie Huaisang was quiet for so long that Nie Mingjue thought he'd fallen asleep, so when he spoke, Nie Mingjue had to school his expression to keep the surprise off his face.

“You died. You died because of that *stupid* sword and a- a *traitor* and-” Nie Huaisang hiccuped, fingers curling tightly against Nie Mingjue's chest as he closed his eyes and whispered his final sentence. “I didn't... I didn't get to say goodbye.”

Nie Mingjue went still at his brother's words. That... that was eerily too close to what had happened. Far too close to be a coincidence. He stared at Nie Huaisang's tear-streaked face, his hand coming to rest against his brother's lower back. He rubbed soothing circles there, the gentle spark and fizz of Nie Huaisang's golden core just able to be felt through the layers of cloth and skin and-

A noise escaped Nie Mingjue as he drew in a sharp breath when the realization hit him.

“Huaisang, what did you *do*?”

It took until dawn had fully broken and the sunrise faded almost entirely from the sky to get the whole story from Nie Huaisang. Nie Mingjue couldn't believe what he was hearing, and yet... And yet, it was so very *Huaisang* that dismissing it as a lie seemed equally as impossible. At the end of the explanation, Nie Mingjue rolled onto his back, his hands resting loosely on his chest.

“So, just to make sure I have this correct, you activated an array you found in the Nie archives that was supposed to just temporarily send you back long enough to say goodbye, but which could have also *killed you* if it didn't work right, and now...” He took in a deep breath. “And now both of us are children again with a war ahead of us.”

“Only if we don't change anything.”

Nie Mingjue turned his head to look at his brother. “What?”

“Only if we don't change anything,” Nie Huaisang repeated. “We could stop the war before it starts. I...” He picked at the blanket, worrying a loose thread there. “I, uh, I may not have been the only one in the array when it activated?”

“What.”

“It's okay, It was just Wen Ning and-”

“*What?*”

Nie Huaisang held up his hands. “He wanted to say goodbye to his sister too. I don't...” He blew out a stream of air. “I don't know if he came back too. I'd send a note, but I have no idea what to say. Any of our messengers or birds would be too recognizable.”

“But the *Ghost General*?”

“It wasn't his fault! None of it was!” Nie Huaisang waved a dismissive hand. “At least, not at Qionqi Path. That was... There were others who'd managed to take control of him. And they interfered at Nightless City, too. That's why Wei Wuxian couldn't control all the fierce corpses there. Wei... Wei Wuxian. We have to find him before the Jiang sect does.”

“What? Why?” Nie Mingjue's head was starting to hurt due to all the information being thrown his way.

“Because if he doesn't go to Lotus Pier, then he can be free to be who he is without worrying about interfering with Jiang-zongzhu's- Sorry, Jiang-gongzi's -life. Jiang Fengmian always held Wei Wuxian up above his own son, and that led to a lot of resentment there, even if Jiang Cheng did view Wei Wuxian as a brother,” Nie Huaisang said seriously. “And... And he may be able to help us with the saber issue eventually. He was already thinking about how to use and redirect resentful energy at *fifteen*. If we give him a place here, give him a home that's accepting of that and willing to use it for good, then maybe it'd help all around.”

“We don't even know where he is,” Nie Mingjue tried, but Nie Huaisang shook his head.

“Right now, he's on the streets of Yiling. Jiang-zongzhu will find him in the next year or so, which means *we* need to find him before then.”

“And what, adopt him into the sect?”

Nie Huaisang shrugged. “Might as well. He's a canny fighter, though I don't think he'd be suited for the saber. Neither he or I grew- grow-” He huffed. “Our adult bodies weren't meant for physical power like that.”

“Both of you were damn skinny,” Nie Mingjue grumbled. He shot a look at Nie Huaisang when he giggled. “What?”

“It's very strange to hear you swear right now.”

Nie Mingjue rolled his eyes and then, just to hear his brother giggle again, reached out and started tickling him. That was the scene the attendant sent to wake Nie Mingjue up walked in on, with Nie Huaisang near-breathless with laughter as his brother wiggled his fingers against his ribs.

“Young Masters? I apologize for interrupting, but it *is* time for breakfast.”

Nie Mingjue stopped tickling Nie Huaisang and helped him up, pleased that he'd cheered him up. “Thank you. We'll be ready in a few minutes,” he said, giving the attendant a small nod. The attendant bowed politely and then left the room, sliding the door shut behind himself.

“Alright, you, go get dressed,” Nie Mingjue said, ruffling Nie Huaisang's hair. “After breakfast, we'll figure out more about what we have to do.”

Nie Huaisang nodded, leaving only after giving his brother one last hug. Nie Mingjue smiled to himself as he got dressed, feeling lighter than he had in years. He waited outside of Nie Huaisang's room until his brother joined him, and then the two of them made their way to the dining hall. Breakfast passed in lively conversation with the other disciples that were close to their ages, and once they were done, Nie Mingjue led the way to a quiet rock garden area with one of the few non-natural water pools in the Unclean Realm.

It was peaceful and they were unlikely to be disturbed there. The two of them settled under a tall pine, simply enjoying one another's presence. They talked quietly of what needed to be immediately done in the next year or so, starting with rescuing Wei Wuxian from the streets of Yiling and going from there. The croak of a raven directly overhead had them pausing, Nie Mingjue's fingers twitching towards Baxia's nearby hilt before he stopped himself.

The raven hopped down the tree's branches, its head turning this way and that as it seemingly examined them. It landed on Baxia's hilt, pecking experimentally at the hard surface before turning to look at Nie Huaisang with far-too intelligent eyes. It held out a leg, displaying the small bamboo tube that was tied to it. Nie Huaisang carefully untied the tube and then looked inside, eyebrows rising when he saw the white of paper within.

He used a thin stick to gently prod the message out of the tube, setting the bamboo aside in order to unroll the scrap of paper. Nie Huaisang read it over once, twice, and then three times before bursting out into laughter. Curious, Nie Mingjue took the note from his brother and read it, an amused snort leaving him before he could stop it. The handwriting was slightly sloppy and childish, but the characters were otherwise readable.

The Ghost General greets the Head-shaker, and would like to know just what is to happen next in his grand plan.

“Well,” Nie Huaisang said, still chuckling, “we should probably figure that out.”

Three Friends, Three Brothers, and a Murder

Chapter Notes

Note: Special thanks to commenter MaddKingsQueen for giving me a plot bunny I wasn't expecting but will wholeheartedly take.

Also, a note on ages in this chapter: they are dumb and annoying. I'm basing Jin Zixuan's age (roughly 8/9) on the fact that he's at Cloud Recesses with Nie Huaisang and the others of that age range. Meng Yao and Lan Xichen are roughly the same age (11/12), making Nie Mingjue the oldest of the trio at 13.

Admittedly, this /does/ bring into the question of 'wait, wouldn't that make Meng Yao the technical heir since he's older?', and to that I say... well, sort of, but he's never going to be recognized by Jin Guangshan, so no. Jin Zixuan is the current and only heir, no matter how many half-siblings he has. I'm doing my best with what we've been given in canon regarding ages, which is about as useful as a tissue paper postage stamp, so...

Also, for my own sanity, Xue Yang is four years younger than Nie Huaisang. As before, Wei Wuxian, Nie Huaisang, and Jiang Cheng are roughly 8, Wen Ning 7, and Wen Qing, 12.

This is a chonker of a chapter and I'm not sorry. We'll skip ahead to Cloud Recesses next chapter.

Finally, I don't do baby talk. I am aware that kids under 10 probably don't talk as maturely as some of the characters here do but a) Nie Huaisang and Wen Ning have the minds of adults, and b) most of the others are Sect heirs or Lans. They're probably going to be more formal at a first meeting than most kiddos.

Wen Ning knew most who saw him underestimated him, mainly due to his size, age, and apparent weakness. It was what he was using now to make his way unnoticed around the halls of the Palace of Sun and Flames in Nightless City late at night. He went to a particular balcony that overlooked the slow moving lava flows far below, double-checking to make sure he was alone and out of sight before bringing out three small sheets of talisman paper. It had initially taken him several tries to make sure he'd gotten the characters on them correct, but now that he was sure he had it right, he wrapped the paper around a specific piece of railing and then the two supports under it. The tiniest bit of spiritual power saw the talismans sink into the wood and out of sight, leaving it looking like nothing had happened.

With a satisfied smile and one last one-time use talisman hidden in a shadowy corner to let him know when Wen Zhuliu came onto the balcony, Wen Ning disappeared back into the depths of the palace, returning to the quarters he shared with his sister with no one the wiser of his journey. Or so he thought, until his sister spoke out of the darkness.

“A-Ning? Where did you go this time?”

Wen Ning jumped, heart racing, and then looked at his sister. She was sitting up in bed, hair escaping from the braid it was in for sleeping. He sighed and then went over to her bed, sitting on the edge.

"I... Wen Zhuliu's favorite balcony," he admitted. Wen Qing sighed.

"The talismans again?"

"This should be the last time!" Wen Ning hastily whispered, seeking to allay her worry and annoyance. "I promise, *jiejie*. The next time he goes there and leans against the railing, it should fail."

Wen Qing ran her fingers through his hair, gently tugging at the long locks. "So you've said, but... I worry, A-Ning."

"I know, I know, but I use more spiritual power to light a candle than I do activating those talismans," Wen Ning assured her. "And..." He looked down at the dim shapes of his hands in his lap. "It'll be better if he's gone. So many people either died or lost their cores because of him and those who commanded him. Taking him out now will save them."

"For better or worse. I just hope it's for the better," Wen Qing said. "I don't want you doing this again."

"I- I won't!" Wen Ning paused. "Well, not unless it's necessary. But I'll talk to you first!"

"You'd better. I can still get my hands on needles at this age."

Wen Ning laughed, the sound more a breathy huff of air than true laughter due to the late hour. It'd been one hell of a surprise to find out that his sister's spirit had returned from the future as well, not to mention learn from Nie Huaisang that his brother's had too. Wen Ning had awoken first, and it hadn't been until his sister had risen from her bed and saw him in his younger form that he'd realized she'd come back with him. The swearing had been memorable, and something he was sure she'd only learned from Uncle Six in the Burial Mounds when he'd been complaining about things under the influence of the wine they made there.

He'd told her everything that had happened after she'd died, sharing the story in what short time they had before they were expected at breakfast. He'd sent a messenger raven to Qinghe before they'd gone to their morning meal, figuring it wouldn't take more than a few hours for the bird to reach the Unclean Realm. It was risky, he knew, but messenger ravens tended to go off on their own if they didn't have any known messages to deliver, and he'd gone early enough that the aviary master wasn't around to stop him.

That was a couple of weeks ago, and ever since then, the two sets of siblings had been making plan after plan of what they should do; getting rid of the odious mainline Wen relatives was primary among them. They couldn't wipe all of them out at once, however, so ridding Wen Ruohan of one of his more powerful weapons aside from the one piece of Yin Iron that he had stolen from Dafan Mountain early on was a good start.

The talismans Wen Ning had been using on the railing would weaken the wood in a near-identical manner to wood rot each time it came into contact with the unique *qi* signature of Wen Zhuliu, with the final set of talismans he'd placed that night providing the stress point and causing the wood to fail. It was a waiting game now, and given the height of the balcony and the presence of the lava

flows far below, there was little doubt the Core-Melting Hand would die due to his injuries or the heat long before anyone could save him.

No one would be able to tell that the wood had been magically compromised, either, as the nature of the talismans were such that Wen Zhuliu's *qi* signature would greatly overpower and overlay Wen Ning's, assuming any piece of the failed railing could be recovered. Wen Zhuliu regularly went to the balcony to get some respite from Wen Ruohan and his sons, as even at their young age Wen Xu and Wen Chao were arrogant, high-handed, and expected everything to get given to them on a silver platter. Those moments of escape were what Wen Ning and Wen Qing were counting on, as Wen Zhuliu was often there for a while before anyone went to look for him, which would only work to their advantage.

Wen Ning leaned into his sister's touch, the lateness of the hour and his far lower levels of physical energy- after all, it hadn't been so long since the Dancing Goddess had stolen some of his spirit in the grand scheme of things, and he was still recovering -getting the better of him. He yawned, belatedly covering his mouth with a hand.

“Go to bed.” Wen Qing finished tidying up his braid and then nudged him off her bed. “We've got lessons in the morning.”

Wen Ning nodded, squeezing his sister's hand before heading over to his own bed. He settled in under the covers, smiling to himself. He didn't relish killing people outside of self-defense or true battle, but he'd come to terms over the years that sometimes sacrifices had to be made to save the innocent. It was never comfortable, and the moment it became that way, he'd promised himself he'd remove himself from the equation.

He closed his eyes, hands resting comfortably on his stomach. The first few wisps of a golden core swirled low in his gut, something that hadn't happened until he was closer to ten, and even then, his core had never been as strong as his companions'. Wen Ning wondered if it'd be different this time around, and drifted off to sleep imagining what he might be able to change if it was.

The gentle tug on his core that signaled Wen Zhuliu stepping onto his preferred balcony had Wen Ning stiffening in the middle of his lessons the next morning. He quickly relaxed, uneasy anticipation making his heart beat a little faster in his chest. He remained where he was, trying to focus on his work. It was boring but it was better than waiting around and doing nothing.

Once his lessons were done, he sought out his sister. He found her in the back of the library, ensconced at one of the tables hidden away in a quiet corner. She had books and scrolls scattered across the table, a pile of papers with neatly inked characters in her personal shorthand script near her elbow.

“*Jiejie*, it went off,” he whispered once he was sure she wasn't in the middle of writing. “What, uh, what are you studying?”

Wen Qing set her brush aside on its rest so it wouldn't drip ink everywhere. “*Qi* deviation,” she replied.

“For Wen-zongzhu?”

Wen Qing made an absent see-sawing gesture with one hand. “Mostly.”

Wen Ning blinked. “Mostly?”

“Mm. The issues the Nie sect have with it are worth trying to solve as well, even if it's just something to toy with from time to time,” she said. “I had an idea regarding Wen-zongzhu, but that...” She sighed. “He's not bad off *now*.”

Wen Ning lowered his voice, even if they were the only ones in the immediate area. “But he will be.”

Wen Qing nodded. “Eventually,” she agreed. She began to tidy up her space, tucking her notes inside her *qiankun* sleeve before grabbing the books and scrolls. “Help me with this?”

“Of course.”

The two of them had the table cleared and cleaned in a span of a few minutes, the scrolls and books returned to their rightful places on the shelves and in the pigeonholes around the library. They stayed together the rest of the day, keeping a sharp ear out for any news of Wen Zhuliu's disappearance. The midday meal came and went without any fuss, and it was only as dinner drew near that they caught wind of a disturbance.

They were in the throne room, sitting to one side and keeping out of the way under Wen Ruohan's orders. He liked having them there as he held court, presumably to show his benevolence and familial due diligence, but rarely interacted with them. Then again, interacting with a twelve and a seven year old wasn't exactly something expected of a sect leader outside of immediate family, especially not when others could care for them.

Wen Qing and Wen Ning were writing quiet notes back and forth to one another under the guise of Wen Qing teaching her brother some of the more complex written characters when a servant hurried in and immediately bowed low to Wen Ruohan, nearly prostrating himself on the floor before his throne.

“Wen-zongzhu, we have been unable to locate Wen Zhuliu,” he said, a faint tremor just barely detectable in his voice. “We are continuing to search the whole palace and the city, but so far, none recall seeing him after breakfast. He is not in any of his usual preferred places.”

Wen Ruohan tapped his fingers against the hard surface of his throne, staring down at the servant with an inscrutable expression. “I see,” he said flatly. “Keep searching. He was due to attend to me before dinner, and I want him found before then.”

“Yes, Wen-zongzhu. I will inform the others right away.”

The servant bowed once more and then scurried off, clearly glad to be out of range of Wen Ruohan's wrath. As dinner crept ever closer and no word of Wen Zhuliu came, Wen Ruohan's mood grew increasingly darker. He toyed with the piece of Yin Iron in one hand, watching the smoky black tendrils of resentful energy swirl around it.

Wen Ning watched him warily out of the corner of his eye. The urge to pull his sister out of the hall and take her far away from the Nightless City and their insane relatives was strong, but he knew that they had to see it through until at least Wen Ruohan had been taken care of permanently. He leaned in closer to his sister, idly gesturing at the paper in front of them to mask his real intentions.

“How long do you think we'll have to stay here until we can make a clean escape?” he murmured, his voice carrying no farther than their little bubble of space.

“It depends on how quickly things move,” Wen Qing replied just as quietly, marking out the most common character for 'time' on a clean sheet of paper as she spoke, her strokes neat and precise. “I have only just started my apprenticeship with the healers here, so I can't be expected to attend to Wen-zongzhu. Besides, he only has one piece of the Iron.”

She finished the last stroke and then set aside her brush with a thoughtful hum. “We will have to see what changes happen with Wen Zhuliu not here.”

Wen Ning considered that and then bobbed his head in a quick nod, looking up from the doodle he was drawing on a spare piece of paper when one of the palace guards came into the throne room some ten minutes later. The guard saluted Wen Ruohan and then straightened up to near perfect attention, his gaze meticulously focused on a point in the middle distance in order not to offend his sect leader.

“Wen-zongzhu, we believe we have found out what happened to Wen Zhuliu,” he reported, wasting no time after Wen Ruohan gestured for him to speak.

“And?”

“And our investigation found a section of broken railing on a balcony Wen Zhuliu is known to frequent. Three guardsmen took to their swords and flew down as close as they could get to the lava flows below.” The guard glanced over at the two children, winced faintly, and then carried on with his grim news. “They found and recovered his remains, sir. It... Wen Zhuliu is dead. The doctors have confirmed this. They believe the impact of the fall mercifully killed him before the... the lava did.”

Wen Ruohan pocketed his piece of Iron and rose to his feet, a scowl marring his face. “The Core-Melting Hand is dead?” he growled.

The guard bowed low in an attempt to placate his leader. “I have people examining the balcony right now. From initial inspection, it looks like mainly wood rot, but some of the craftsmen say having wood above a heat source, even one so far away, takes it toll over time, so that may have contributed to the issue.”

“Excuses,” Wen Ruohan spat. He ran a hand over his face and then made an impatient gesture. “Go. Tell the doctors to deal with his corpse. It's of no use to me now. And get someone to replace that railing.”

“Yes, Wen-zongzhu. Of course, Wen-zongzhu.”

The guard bowed one last time and then left, Wen Ruohan stalking after him.

Dinner that night was a tense affair, and Wen Ning only relaxed when he and his sister were safe in their room with the usual privacy talismans stuck to the walls, floor, and ceiling. It may have been overkill, but one never knew who might be listening and when.

“That went better than expected,” Wen Ning said. “I don't- I don't feel *good* about killing him, but-”

“-but it needed to be done,” Wen Qing finished for him. “I know, and I'm glad you don't feel good about killing him. Deaths like that should never sit easy on the heart, especially out of the context of war. But...” She stubbornly squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, something Wen Ning had seen his sister do a thousand times as an adult when dealing with tough information, and he ached to see it on her young face now. “...but what's done is done, and many lives will be saved because of it.”

Her expression softened as she drew him into a hug. “If you want, we can light incense for him and burn some spirit money, as while he was not of our bloodline, Wen Zhuliu was still part of our sect, and we can respect him in that way.” She smiled bitterly. “I doubt Wen Ruohan will even bother.”

“At least he was too burned to become a fierce corpse,” Wen Ning said, resting his cheek against her shoulder. “I can't imagine that would've turned out well.”

“Likely not,” Wen Qing agreed. “For now, we'll bide our time and wait. We have seven years until Cloud Recesses, assuming we can still get there. If we can't escape before then, then we'll use that as our way out. We can claim sanctuary there, as it would cause too much confusion to try and claim sanctuary in Qinghe.”

“A lot can happen in seven years,” Wen Ning pointed out. His sister nodded, one hand running idly along the line of his spine.

“That it can, A-Ning, that it can.”

Nie Huaisang and Nie Mingjue's father succumbed to his injuries and a final *qi* deviation a month after their return. The pain of his loss was duller this time around, since it'd been well over a decade for the two brothers originally, but the knowledge that their father was gone from the world still hurt. Once the former Nie sect leader was properly buried with all due honors and pomp and circumstance and Nie Mingjue officially declared sect leader, though a council of elders would stand as advisors and regents until he turned sixteen, as that was the youngest their sect rules would allow a leader to be.

Nie Mingjue would still be involved in the day to day aspects of running the sect, learning as much as he could over the next three years. He predicted he'd find the daily lessons boring, but he was determined to not make some of the same early mistakes he had the first time around. He was sure that the various disputes between minor nobles, merchants, and farmers he'd arbitrated the first time around wouldn't vary greatly from how they'd occurred then, but one could never tell.

He and Nie Huaisang had agreed to not worry so much about changing the small things like that unless it was necessary, instead focusing on the major events that they knew would have a greater impact on the future. It was easier that way, and marginally less-headache inducing, or so they hoped. Nie Huaisang was still adamant about finding Wei Wuxian before Jiang Fengmian, however, so Nie Mingjue organized a trip that would see them visiting Lanling, Gusu, and then Yunmeng. The official reason given was to introduce him to the three Great Sects that weren't currently on bad terms with Qinghe Nie as Sect Leader Nie, as there wasn't a Discussion Conference planned for quite some time.

Nie Huaisang was also determined to introduce himself to the various Sect heirs/members of his age, wanting to make at least acquaintances, if not friends, with Jin Zixuan, Lan Wangji, and Jiang

Cheng. He knew Lan Wangji would be the hardest nut to crack, but he also wasn't above using his knowledge of the man from the future to ease the way.

He'd painted a small white fan with a rabbit to act as a first meeting gift. Jin Zixuan would get one with a golden carp on an off-white background, something he hoped the other boy would appreciate. Jiang Cheng's was purple with an elegant dog in white ink carefully painted across the inner paper. Nie Huaisang had had quite a lot of fun painting tiny paw prints in a trail behind the dog, wanting Jiang Cheng to have some fun with his gift.

He'd made sure to paint a fan for Lan Xichen, not wanting to leave him out of the gift-giving the other Sect heirs would experience. It'd taken him a while to figure it out, but after some discussion with his brother, Nie Huaisang had painted a white crane on a pale blue fan for the older boy. The fans were tucked in wooden boxes marked with each boy's name, making sure they weren't mixed up during the trip.

A small retinue of guards, elders, and attendants accompanied Nie Huaisang and Nie Mingjue on their journey, making sure they were kept safe, educated, and entertained as they traveled. Lanling was the first stop on their grand tour. Jin Guangshan was as odious as ever, with a thin veneer of civility floating over the slick top of his oily personality. Madam Jin and Jin Zixuan were there as well, though Jin Zixuan was poorly disguising a bored expression as he stood beside his father.

Once all the formalities were seen to, Nie Huaisang and Jin Zixuan were sent off to a side room under the watchful eye of Madam Jin and some servants while Nie Mingjue, some of the Nie elders, and Jin Guangshan went to a larger discussion room. Nie Huaisang bowed politely to Jin Zixuan before drawing out the wooden box from his sleeve and presenting it to him.

"A gift for you, Jin-gongzi," he said with a warm smile. Jin Zixuan glanced at his mother, who nodded in approval.

"Go on. I'm sure Young Master Nie would not give you anything harmful."

"Oh, no, of course not!" Nie Huaisang said with a laugh as Jin Zixuan slid back the top of the box. "Just something I thought he might like."

Jin Zixuan handed the box off to a servant before carefully opening the fan. He looked up at Nie Huaisang with a frown. "It's blank."

"Ah, turn it over." Nie Huaisang fiddled with his own fan- a plain white one with the vague outlines of birds flying across it -as Jin Zixuan did as told. Jin Zixuan's eyes went wide when he saw the carp arching across the fan, its scales bright in the sunlight pouring in from a nearby window.

"That's lovely," Madam Jin said. "My compliments to the artist who painted it. I may have to ask for their name for a fan of my own."

"Ah. No, it's..." Nie Huaisang shook his head. "I painted that. I wanted it to be something personal. *Da-ge* says that I'm to be heir until he has children of his own and that it would be beneficial to make alliances with the other Great Sect heirs while we're still young." He opened his fan, fluttering it a few times before letting it drop. "I don't know about *alliances*, but I could always use more friends."

He pulled a faint pout when Jin Zixuan looked up at him. Good, he had his interest. “There's no one my age really to play with back home and it's *boring*, especially now that *da-ge* is Sect leader. He used to play with me all the time, but...”

Nie Huaisang shrugged carelessly, a motion which would've had his etiquette tutors grumbling if they saw it. He was supposed to be eight, after all, and eight year olds weren't exactly paragons of manners, no matter how many tutors they had.

“I'm sorry about your father.”

Nie Huaisang blinked, not expecting the quiet comment from Jin Zixuan.

“Oh. Um, thank you,” he said, caught off guard by the older boy. “Father was sick for a long while. I'm sad he's gone, but *da-ge* says it's better that he's not in pain any more.”

“You really like your brother, don't you?” Jin Zixuan asked, testing his fan out a bit before carefully closing it and putting it into his sleeve.

“He's all the close family I have,” Nie Huaisang said truthfully as the two of them sat down on some nearby cushions, Madam Jin taking a seat a short distance away. “We've got some distant cousins, but that's about it.”

Jin Zixuan sighed. “I wish I had siblings. I've got a cousin, but he's *boring*.” He wrinkled his nose. “And rude.”

“*Zixuan*. Be kind.”

“It's true, mother. *Zixun* is rude,” Jin Zixuan said defensively. “He bullies the servants and anyone else he thinks he can get away with being mean to. He thinks he's better than anyone else because he's related to Father.”

Nie Huaisang stayed quiet, though he very much agreed with Jin Zixuan. Jin Zixun was an ass to the highest degree, and not just because he had his own head up his rear end so much that he could use it as a hat. Jin Zixun was all the worst qualities of his uncle save for the philandering, and even then, Nie Huaisang wasn't sure that Jin Zixun didn't share some of the same proclivities. He'd just never bothered to find out in his first life.

“Well, while we're here, I'd be happy to spend time with you,” he told Jin Zixuan, “and maybe after I leave, we can still keep in touch by letters. I'd like to have someone to talk to who's my age from time to time.”

“Letters?” Jin Zixuan contemplated that as servants brought in tea and light refreshments. “I'd like that.” He perked up. “And Father can't say no, either.”

It was fascinating to see Jin Zixuan start to open up at the mere thought of someone wanting to be friends with him, even if it was long distance. Nie Huaisang knew he was at the advantage here for the most part, but he was also curious to see how fostering a friendship with the Jin heir would change the both of them.

“Wonderful!” he said. “We're going to Gusu and the Cloud Recesses next, and then after that, we're going to go to Yunmeng and Lotus Pier. I'm excited about both of them, but Lotus Pier sounds

really interesting. We don't really have a lot of rivers in Qinghe, so it'll be fun to see all the water there.”

Jin Zixuan huffed as a servant poured him some tea. “If you like that kind of thing.”

“You don't like rivers?”

“No, it's-” Jin Zixuan glanced back at his mother and then lowered his voice. “Mother told me that I'm betrothed to Jiang-*guniang*. I don't want to be betrothed. Girls are stupid, anyways, and I bet she's not very interesting.”

“Have you talked to her at all?”

Jin Zixuan stared at him, but Nie Huaisang ignored it in favor of trying his tea.

“What?”

“Why would I want to talk to her?”

“To get to know her?” Nie Huaisang suggested. “You're not going to be married for ages, right?”

Jin Zixuan stared at his own cup of tea with a scowl. “I guess.”

“Write her a letter, then. Maybe she doesn't want to get married either. Or maybe she wants a friend just as much as you do.”

“You're weird,” Jin Zixuan declared before taking a drink. Nie Huaisang grinned.

“Thank you.”

Jin Zixuan huffed as he set his cup down. “I... Maybe. I'll think about it. Do you think if she hates me enough, she'll get her mother to call off the betrothal?”

Nie Huaisang sighed. He had a lot of work ahead of him.

“Why don't you try being nice first and see how it goes? Here, let's think of what you could say to her...”

They arrived in Gusu several days later, leaving the carriages that the elders had insisted on- Nie Mingjue would've been fine with a horse to share with his brother, but *apparently* their new Sect leader and his heir couldn't travel so openly across the land -in Caiyi Town before heading by foot up to the Cloud Recesses. Nie Huaisang did his best to make it all the way up the long and winding path on his own, but he'd forgotten that he wasn't an adult any more and had significantly less strength and stamina than he had possessed in his teens or early thirties.

The party paused in a clearing halfway up the path to rest. Nie Huaisang leaned against his brother as they recovered, idly cooling himself with lazy wafts of his fan. He huffed in annoyance when a fly kept buzzing around them, and absently sent a bit of *qi*-powered wind towards it with his fan to knock it away. Nie Mingjue was the only one who noticed, as the others in the party were busy talking among themselves.

“Hm. How long've you been able to do that?” he asked quietly.

“Huh?”

“You just channeled your *qi* through your fan, even though it's not a spiritual weapon.”

“Oh.” Nie Huaisang shrugged. “It's not really anything special. It takes more energy to light a candle, especially when it comes to flies.”

Nie Mingjue gently flicked his brother's nose. “It's something we can use,” he said. “And... I guess it wouldn't be *too* bad for you to have a weapon that isn't a saber.”

Nie Huaisang stared at his brother. “You... you wouldn't mind me not using a saber?”

“Well... It'd be a change, for sure, but if the Meishan Yu can use non-standard spiritual weapons and still be respected, then so can we.” Nie Mingjue tilted his head thoughtfully. “Maybe we can ask them to create your weapon when you're old enough.” He lowered his voice. “And... And if they create your weapon, you wouldn't have to worry about *qi* deviation. At least, not from a saber spirit.”

Nie Huaisang wasted no time in wrapping his arms around his brother as tightly as he could manage, tears pricking at the corners of his eyes. “We'll figure out how to help you too,” he muttered into Nie Mingjue's shoulder. “Just watch.”

“I can't wait.”

The Cloud Recesses were as beautiful as ever, mist curling around the buildings and trees on its grounds. Nie Huaisang stayed by his brother's side as they were led to the *Yashi*, or Elegant Room, to await the arrival of Lan Qiren and his nephews. Their servants were taken to the quarters they would be staying in for the next few days to put the luggage away. They weren't waiting for too long, Lan Qiren stepping into the room with Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji a few paces behind him.

Once all the pleasantries were exchanged and tea was served at the low wooden table in the center of the room, Nie Mingjue cleared his throat and then gently nudged Nie Huaisang.

“If it would be alright, my brother brought tokens of friendship with him to give to your nephews, Lan-*xiansheng*,” he said as Nie Huaisang drew the two fan boxes out of his *qiankun* sleeve. Lan Qiren regarded Nie Huaisang for a moment before nodding.

“Very well. Xichen. Wangji. Thank Young Master Nie for your gifts,” he said as Nie Huaisang slid the correct boxes to their new owners. Nie Huaisang focused on Lan Wangji's reaction more than Lan Xichen's, as he was sure the elder Lan brother would have one of his trademark quietly pleased smiles. Lan Wangji's expression was not quite as controlled as it would be when he was older, so Nie Huaisang was able to see the surprise and then delight flicker across his face when he saw the rabbit painted on his fan before it was smoothed away.

“Thank you, Nie-gongzi,” Lan Xichen said, his brother echoing him shortly after. “Wangji, why don't you go show Nie-gongzi around while Uncle and I speak with Nie-zongzhu and the elders?”

Lan Wangji hesitated only briefly before nodding and getting to his feet, Nie Huaisang following his example. Once they'd bowed and then left the *Yashi*, Lan Wangji taking his fan with him and putting it into his sleeve.

“Do you like rabbits, Lan-gongzi? I wasn't sure what to paint for you, but rabbits are cute and they're lucky, so I went with that. Also, *da-ge* says pets aren't allowed here, so I figured you could have something to look at that doesn't break those rules, not to mention it's useful too.”

Lan Wangji was quiet for a long moment before speaking, his voice soft. It was strange not hearing the low rumble he would eventually gain as he grew, but Nie Huaisang shoved that aside in order to hear Lan Wangji's words.

“You painted this?”

Nie Huaisang nodded. “I did. I like painting things, especially fans. And...” He rubbed at the back of his neck. “I was hoping we could write letters to one another? Only if you want, though! I'd like to make more friends my age. I know we probably won't see each other a lot outside of official events right now, but letters are a good start, right?”

Lan Wangji contemplated the request as they walked, his hands tucked behind his back. As the silence stretched on between them, Nie Huaisang had to fight to keep from filling it with chatter like he would have with Wei Wuxian or Wen Ning. Eventually, Lan Wangji nodded briefly in agreement.

“Mn. I would like that.”

Nie Huaisang wondered just how many friends Lan Wangji had as a child, but given what he knew of him, it likely wasn't many. That just made Nie Huaisang want to be his friend even more, knowledge of the future or not. He shot Lan Wangji a bright smile.

“Great! You won't regret it, I promise!”

They stopped in Yunping City before they went on to Lotus Pier, Nie Mingjue wanting to see if Meng Yao was still there or if he'd gone on to Lanling already. Once the elders were installed in an inn, Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang went out into the city with a few servants following them, Nie Mingjue leading the way. The brothers had made sure to bring enough money to buy out Meng Shi's contract and cover the loss of Meng Yao, with plans to get the woman to a doctor as quickly as possible once they found her.

Neither of them were sure where the brothel was that Meng Shi and Meng Yao lived in, so they had to travel some ways before they came across one in a better part of town where a ruckus was taking place. They arrived just as Meng Shi was tossed out naked onto the street by one of the brothel's patrons, dust from the street immediately streaking across her skin as she hit the ground. Meng Yao went to follow her to help, but the patron kicked him down the short flight of stairs leading to the street. Meng Yao hit his head as he tumbled down the stairs, his unconscious body landing with a thud.

The Nie brothers glanced at one another before moving into swift and decisive action. Nie Mingjue went to deal with the rowdy patron, Baxia held menacingly in one hand, while Nie Huaisang

scurried first over to Meng Shi, quickly taking off his outer robe and draping it as much as he could over her nude form before going to check on Meng Yao.

“Huan Jia, Li Yan, take care of her!” Nie Huaisang snapped to the servants, not caring that an eight year old shouldn't be bossing around his elders, servants or not. He unthinkingly used the tone of a Sect leader rather than a child as he spoke. “Fa Hui, Song Quan, help me with him. We need to get both of them to a doctor. *Da-ge* will deal with everything else here.”

The servants hurried to do as told, Huan Jia and Li Yan helping Meng Shi to her feet. Huan Jia provided her with her own outer robe since it would fit better and cover more, while Li Yan steadied Meng Shi. Fa Hui carefully picked up Meng Yao, the large man cradling him easily in his arms.

“Song Quan, stay here with *da-ge* in case he needs help,” Nie Huaisang decided. “The rest of you, follow me.”

A doctor's clinic wasn't too far away, thankfully- though Nie Huaisang stoutly refused to think *why* that was -and soon Meng Yao and Meng Shi were being seen to by the doctor and her apprentice. Nie Huaisang sent Fa Hui back to the brothel to help Nie Mingjue if needed while he and the others stayed at the clinic. Nie Mingjue joined them there after a further quarter of an hour, nodding once to his brother when Nie Huaisang shot him a questioning look.

“All taken care of,” he said. “How are they doing?”

“Ah.” Nie Huaisang considered how to answer the question without giving away that he already knew their names. “The boy-”

“-Meng Yao-”

“-thank you. He's awake but resting, last we knew, and they're keeping an eye on him for the time being. His mother-”

“-Meng Shi-”

“-Meng Shi- thank you again, *da-ge* -is being treated as well,” Nie Huaisang finished. “We're just waiting, now.”

Nie Mingjue took a seat next to him. “The elders aren't going to be happy.”

“What're they going to do, punish you for helping people?”

“Brat.”

“Grumpy.”

Nie Huaisang saw the servants do their best to hide their laughter behind hands or straight faces as he and his brother gently bickered, though Fa Hui in particular was horrible at hiding the fond smile that threatened to take over his entire face. The two brothers were well-liked by the servants both in this timeline and the former one, something both were grateful for. They made sure to treat the servants as the valued members of the household that they were rather than little more than mobile decorations to use and abuse like some of their fellows.

Nie Mingjue sent Huan Jia out to buy several simple sets of clothes for Meng Shi and Meng Yao, doubting the brothel owner would allow them to fetch any of their belongings. More- or in Meng Shi's case, *any* -pairs of shoes would have to wait until they were able to get the correct sizes from a cobbler, but that was easily done. All they had to do was wait until the doctor was done with her work.

That took another few hours, and when the doctor came out to the front room of her clinic, she seemed rather surprised at the amount of people in her waiting room. Nie Mingjue stood up and bowed politely to her.

“Honored *yisheng*, how are they doing?” he asked as he straightened up. To her credit, the doctor merely bowed back and then answered.

“The boy will be fine with rest. His mother is sick and will require longer treatment with medicine. Are you staying in town?”

Nie Mingjue shook his head. “No. We'll be bringing them back to Qinghe with us. We have our own doctor with us, but they're back at the inn. We didn't want to wait to take them there.”

The doctor nodded approvingly. “It's good that you didn't. We were able to get her started on the medicine that she needs. I'll write down a list for your doctor to keep giving her. She shouldn't be going on horses, nor walking, for at least two weeks. Her son isn't as bad off. He can ride or walk within a few days. A week at most.”

“We've got carriages,” Nie Huaisang offered. “They can easily ride in those. We have more than enough room.”

“Very well, young masters. I won't ask you why you saved them, but...” The doctor's professional expression softened. “I'm glad you did. They both deserve better lives than here.”

“Don't worry,” Nie Mingjue told her. “They'll get all that and more.”

The addition of Meng Shi and Meng Yao to their party did bring some consternation from the elders, but Nie Mingjue just ignored them and focused on making sure that their new sect members were taken care of. Due to Meng Shi's illness, they didn't spend as long at Lotus Pier as they had in Lanling or Gusu, taking only two days to present Nie Mingjue as the new Nie Sect leader and for Nie Huaisang to give Jiang Cheng his fan. Nie Huaisang had given Jiang Yanli a simple but elegant hairpin so she wouldn't feel left out.

Getting Jiang Cheng to agree to sending letters was difficult, but in the end Nie Huaisang was able to convince him by saying that he wanted to hear more about both the dogs Jiang Cheng had and about Jiang Cheng himself. Madam Yu closed the deal when she agreed that it would be good for Jiang Cheng to start building up relationships with other Sects.

Due to the weather beginning to cool and turn towards winter, the traveling party left Lotus Pier and headed west, making a stop in Yiling one crisp autumn evening. Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang kept a sharp eye out for Wei Wuxian, Nie Huaisang glancing into every alleyway they passed as they headed to an inn. He grabbed at his brother's arm when he saw a small figure rummaging around in a trash heap, his eyes widening.

“*Da-ge*,” he murmured. Nie Mingjue turn to look at what Nie Huaisang had seen and froze.

“Ah. I wonder...” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and then tugged on Nie Huaisang's hand. “Come on. I have an idea.”

That idea saw Nie Huaisang 'sneaking' out of the room he shared with his brother later that night and out of the inn, his dark gray under-robos helping him blend in better than the paler olive of the outer robes he'd left behind. He'd brought an extra inner robe with him and thick socks, knowing it would be far warmer than whatever Wei Wuxian was wearing at the moment. It took some time to find the other boy, but eventually Nie Huaisang located him huddled in an alley behind the meager protection of a barrel.

“Psst! Psst! Hey, are you Wei Ying?” Nie Huaisang hissed, startling Wei Wuxian out of a fitful sleep. Wei Wuxian stared at him with wide eyes, clearly not sure what to do in the situation that someone was voluntarily talking to him.

“Y-yes,” he said, pulling his legs protectively against his chest. Nie Huaisang grinned and then held out the bundle of clothes he'd brought with him.

“Great! My brother and I have been looking for you. Our parents knew your parents-” Technically, he was sure they had known *of* Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren, though he had no idea if they'd ever actually *met* “-and we want to take you back home.”

“Home?”

Nie Huaisang bobbed his head, his smile not failing. “Home! It's in Qinghe. It's safe and sound. Oh! My name is Nie Huaisang, but if you come with us, you can call me *shixiong* if you want, and you'll be my *shidi*.” He paused. “Huh. I've never had a little brother before.”

Wei Wuxian had always been cagey about what his actual age was, but since Nie Huaisang *technically* would outrank him in the sect since he'd been there first, *shixiong* it was.

“*Shi- shixiong? Shidi?* Like in a sect?”

“Yep! Here, take this. It's got to be warmer than what you're wearing right now,” Nie Huaisang said, plopping the bundle of clothes into Wei Wuxian's lap without waiting for him to respond. “*Da-ge* is... Well, he's kind of stern, but he's a really good person, and I think you're going to like him. So... Will you come with me? Or would you want to go somewhere else?”

Wei Wuxian fiddled with the soft fabric of the robe in his lap, biting his bottom lip. It was so strange seeing him so indecisive, as the Wei Wuxian Nie Huaisang was used to was decidedly not, but Nie Huaisang had to keep reminding himself that this was technically not the same person, and may never be given his meddling. It did hurt to think of it that way, but Nie Huaisang was nothing if not practiced at burying his emotions at the back of his mind and then dealing with them later, if at all.

“What...” Wei Wuxian looked up at him with wide, worried eyes. “What if your Sect leader says no?”

Nie Huaisang just smiled encouragingly at him.

“Trust me, he won't.”

In accordance to their plan, Nie Mingjue made sure to thoroughly 'yell' at Nie Huaisang for sneaking out at night, though he didn't go on for very long and once the supposed argument was done, he'd had water brought up to their room for Wei Wuxian to get clean with, as well as some food. It wasn't so late in the evening that the inn's kitchen was entirely closed, but it was late enough that all they had ready was some stew and bread.

Wei Wuxian wolfed the food down regardless, ignoring Nie Huaisang's assurances that no one was going to take it away from him. Once he was fed and cleaned as much as was possible- though it would likely take several more baths before he was truly free of all the dirt and grime from the streets -Wei Wuxian was encouraged to change into the clean clothes Nie Huaisang had gifted him. It took some convincing for him to even allow them to brush his hair out, but eventually Wei Wuxian let Nie Huaisang do so with a specially enchanted comb that smoothed out tangles and permanently removed any parasites or other unfortunate side-effects of living on the streets for several years.

Once the newest addition to their party was curled up under the blankets on Nie Huaisang's bed, the brothers settled in for the night. Nie Huaisang fell asleep with the sound of his brother's heartbeat in his ear and enjoyed quite possibly what was the best night of sleep he'd had in decades.

Their final stop before turning northward towards Qinghe was a small town called Kuizhou. It was mainly to restock the travel and medical supplies they hadn't been able to get in Yiling. The apothecary they'd gone to in Yiling had recommended a cousin of his in Kuizhou for a particular root that was needed for Meng Shi's medicine, as he'd been out of it when they'd gone to him. So it was to Kuizhou they went, even if it was a little out of their intended path.

While the doctor that had accompanied the Nie party went to go find the apothecary, the rest of them went to the market area to get lunch and perhaps some treats for the first leg of the trip north and back home. Wei Wuxian stuck close to Nie Huaisang, enough that Nie Huaisang eventually just loosely linked their arms at the elbows to keep his new *shidi* from getting pulled away or lost. Wei Wuxian was confused by it at first but eventually relaxed enough to not need the physical contact at all.

Nie Huaisang looked up from his perusal of the goods at the stall before him just in time to see a small child dart out into the road. The boy's clothes were ragged and dirty, and his hair was snarled with tangles. He couldn't have been older than four or five at the most. Nie Huaisang's heart ached to see such a young child on the streets. A deep and angry shout from behind the child announced the presence of someone chasing after him, something that got the attention of the rest of their party.

Nie Huaisang watched in what felt like slow motion as the child zigzagged across the road in an attempt to lose his pursuer, his unheeding and jagged path taking him into direct line with a large and heavy cart that was moving at a fast clip his way. Nie Huaisang barely registered the shout that tore out of his throat, nor the blue-white lash of semi-focused and desperate *qi* bursting out of his outstretched hand to wrap around the child's waist and yank him out of the path of the cart.

The small child yelped as he was pulled through the air and towards Nie Huaisang, too startled to fight all that much when Nie Huaisang wrapped his arms around him right after he slammed into

the older boy. The two of them tumbled to the ground, Nie Huaisang doing his best to cushion the fall. Wei Wuxian reached him first, Nie Mingjue and Meng Yao not long after.

“Huaisang! Are you alright?”

Nie Huaisang slowly uncurled from around the child in his arms, blinking dazedly up at his brothers.

“Is he okay?”

“Is *he* okay? You just-” Nie Mingjue sighed sharply. “Let me see him.”

Nie Huaisang patted the child on his arm as he looked up distrustfully at Nie Mingjue. “It’s okay,” he assured him. “*Da-ge* might look grumpy, but he’s as soft as a kitten on the inside, I promise.”

That earned a glare from Nie Mingjue and a giggle from Wei Wuxian, but it served to lighten the mood nonetheless. Once Nie Mingjue had carefully extracted the boy from his brother’s arms, Meng Yao helped Nie Huaisang to sit up, supporting him with a hand against his back. Nie Huaisang was more concerned for the child than his own health, and really he didn’t feel *that* bad, just a little tired from the unexpected use of energy.

While Nie Mingjue looked over the child, the servants successfully diverted the attention of the man who’d been chasing after him, Fa Hui glaring sternly at him until he slunk away with his tail between his legs.

“He seems fine. Skinny as a bamboo shoot, but otherwise okay.” Nie Mingjue absently ruffled the boy’s hair. “What’s your name, hmm?”

The boy eyed him suspiciously, clearly not used to a kind touch. It was Wei Wuxian who managed to get through to him, holding out a piece of candied loquat to him. The sweet treat was quickly examined and then consumed with a happy hum.

“So... What’s your name, then?” Wei Wuxian asked. “I’ll give you another piece if you tell us.”

“A-Yang!”

Wei Wuxian dutifully handed over the sweet, which A-Yang ate just as swiftly as the first piece. Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang exchanged wary looks. A child named A-Yang who just so happened to love sweets? It was possible that this wasn’t Xue Yang since many children loved sweets, and Yang was a pretty common name, but his age was roughly correct, so they had to be sure.

“Do you remember your family name?” Nie Huaisang prompted. A-Yang considered the question and then shook his head, too busy with licking the sweet remnants of the candy off his fingers.

“Huaisang, a word?”

The two brothers moved far enough out of range so as to not be heard but not so far that they lost sight of everyone else. Nie Mingjue ran a hand along his jaw as he thought.

“Should we take him with us?”

Nie Huaisang blinked, startled at the question. "Are you seriously asking that? We can't just leave him here! He's *four*, maybe five at the most. Besides, we've already changed his path as it is. He may not have been hit by that cart last time either, but it's definitely already turned out for the better for him."

"It could not be him," Nie Mingjue pointed out.

"My earlier answer of him being *four* still stands, but even so, I highly doubt the Xue Yang we knew was actually related to Xue Chonghai," Nie Huaisang countered. The sound of laughter had the two of them looking over at their group in unison, only to see A-Yang laughing brightly at something Wei Wuxian had said, Meng Yao looking on in amusement. Nie Mingjue sighed.

Nie Huaisang knew that sound. That was the sound of Nie Mingjue giving in to avoid a further fight.

"Fine, fine, he can come back with us," he said with a long-suffering tone. "But no more. We don't have *room*."

"I won't take in any more *shidi* or *shimei* on this trip," Nie Huaisang promised.

(And if, two years later, a certain Second Lady of Mo and her four-year-old son happened to travel to Qinghe and then ended up staying there, Nie Huaisang *swore* he had nothing to do with it. Nothing at all.)

Back to School

Chapter Notes

Woo, the start of the Cloud Recesses arc! This is where we heavily start to diverge from canon, so fair warning. In news that will shock no one, Wen Chao is still a dick and Wei Wuxian hates bullies.

Any recognizable dialogue from the show is (C) the creators of the Untamed

Also, I know that by this time in the show Lan Xichen is the Lan Sect leader, but I'm going to give the poor guy a little break for now.

Also also, my love for the *Protector of the Small* quartet is showing in this chapter re: war fans, and I had far too much fun researching the specific name for Japan that is used in China (currently, anyways; not sure what it was back then but I can't find anything, so if anyone knows, let me know) rather than the general term of Dongying. I'm hoping to get another chapter up before Tuesday, but we shall see.

A resounding boom echoed across the Unclean Realm, followed by thick plumes of pale green and vibrant pink smoke. Lan Xichen startled at the sudden noise, his tea nearly sloshing out of his cup. Nie Mingjue sighed, drained his cup, and then got to his feet.

“What was *that*?”

“That,” Nie Mingjue said with a roll of his eyes, “was Wei Wuxian. We'd best go find out what it was this time.”

“*This* time?”

“The last time he blew something up that loudly, he ended up missing half an eyebrow and managed to turn Nie Yang and himself *green*.”

Lan Xichen's face went through several quick emotions before his Lan training took over, smoothing out into a mostly calm expression. “Green? What was he even trying to do?”

“Make shiny paints for Huaisang. Nie Yang was trying to help him. Thankfully, it was a month before they went to the Meishan Yu for their weapons, so by the time he, Meng Yao, and Huaisang left, Wei Wuxian was his normal color and his eyebrow had grown back. Mostly,” Nie Mingjue replied as they left his office and headed out toward the isolated courtyard where Wei Wuxian's tinkering workshop was located. It had once been a large shed used to store wood, but it had been unused for several years before Wei Wuxian had discovered it and asked if he could use it for his experiments.

Nie Mingjue hadn't seen any problems with granting Wei Wuxian the use of the space, especially not after it'd been warded to withstand fire and vent out harmful fumes to somewhere uninhabited.

The particular array that had been used didn't provide for soundproofing, unfortunately, but the inhabitants of the Unclean Realm had gotten used to explosions of various sizes and odd smells and lights coming from the workshop when Wei Wuxian was in residence.

When they arrived at the courtyard the workshop was located in, it was to find Wei Wuxian and Nie Yang laughing on one of the benches there, Meng Shi watching on in indulgent fondness. It had been a rule Nie Mingjue had insisted on when he'd given Wei Wuxian the workshop- that an adult had to be nearby when any experiments were going on, even if the adult wasn't in the workshop. Meng Shi had gladly taken over that responsibility when she wasn't tutoring the various younger members of the sect in the arts and literature.

Nie Mingjue had refused to allow anyone to shame her for her former profession and doing what she had to do to survive in the world, and had done his best to weed out those who might cause problems. It wasn't perfect, but as the years passed and more and more of the sect saw her for more than just her circumstances, those who did say anything were quickly found out and sent to Nie Mingjue to deal with. Nie Mingjue had kept an eye on the man who had, in the other timeline, become the general Meng Yao had slain, not sure what to do with him. He hadn't caused any problems so far that Nie Mingjue was aware of, and he was a valuable training asset, so for the time being he stayed.

He was surprised to see Mo Meifen, the former Second Lady of Mo, there as well, her son sitting next to her under a nearby tree with a book spread out over his lap and a talisman stuck to the trunk above their heads that helped to muffle the noises coming from the workshop. Mo Xuanyu was a surprisingly quiet nine year old, though he was already very good at talismans and things that didn't require a great amount of spiritual power for someone his age. Nie Huaisang had told his brother about how Mo Xuanyu was mistreated by both sides of his family, which had likely driven him even further down the path of mental instability that dealing with demonic cultivation had started him on. Mo Xuanyu would never be much of a fighter, but Nie Mingjue thought he may just be one hell of a scholar or inventor if given the chance.

Nie Mingjue cleared his throat and crossed his arms over his chest. Neither Wei Wuxian or Nie Yang seemed harmed, though their robes were more than a little sooty and singed. Wei Wuxian shot him a bright grin when he saw him.

“*Da-ge!* Did you see that?”

“No, but I heard it,” Nie Mingjue said. “What were you doing?”

He hadn't had the heart to break Wei Wuxian of the habit of calling him *da-ge*, but at least he had the sense to call him *Nie-zongzhu* when it was a formal situation. Besides, he was quite happy to have another little brother, and Nie Huaisang seemed pleased about it as well. None of the other younger disciples had the bravery to call Nie Mingjue anything other than his proper title, but they did seem to delight in using him as a tree substitute after he'd hit his final growth spurt a few years back, particularly the ones small enough to do so. He'd made sure to let them know that they could come to him with their problems, no matter how big or small, save for when he was doing important Sect leader business.

Having Meng Yao at his side as one of his right-hand aides and advisors from a young age helped as well. Meng Yao was surprisingly good with the younger disciples, able to deflect them when Nie Mingjue needed to focus on Sect business in such a way that they didn't feel slighted or ignored. Nie Mingjue worried about Meng Yao eventually wanting to seek out Jin Guangshan for validation,

but so far nothing had come of that worry. Having Meng Shi still be alive and well seemed to have changed a lot for Meng Yao, as had the fierce protectiveness both Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang showed when people tried to belittle him or his mother, Wei Wuxian and the other disciples quickly following their lead over the years.

Meng Yao was off dealing with the drudgery that was inventory management in the food stores, working with the head farmers and millers to ensure that there would be enough space to hold the rice, millet, and other grains that were due to be harvested later that year. Nie Mingjue was glad for it, as he'd never had the patience for such tedious work, but Meng Yao seemed to truly enjoy it, especially since he was getting rewarded for it both in pay and recognition. He, Wei Wuxian, and some of the other cultivators in the Sect had worked out several arrays that would keep pests and rodents out of the food stores, which had then sparked a line of inquiry down the path of food preservation.

Nothing concrete had come of that yet, but Nie Mingjue knew it was only a matter of time, something he greatly approved of. If those sorts of arrays could be figured out, accredited to the Qinghe Nie Sect, and then distributed out to the other sects, both Great and otherwise, at a small cost, it could potentially save a lot of lives and be a good source of revenue for the sect. It would certainly start the turn-around for Qinghe Nie to be known as something more than a sect of warriors and nothing more.

“Exploring the use of *qiankun* bags and sleeves, and if the methods of making them could be translated into something bigger, like a chest,” Wei Wuxian said, dragging Nie Mingjue's thoughts away from Meng Yao and food stores. Nie Yang nodded enthusiastically.

“We were working with a box maybe an arm span wide in all directions, but it didn't work,” the eleven-year-old said, pushing a lock of hair that had escaped from the messy horse's tail he usually kept it in out of his face and behind his ear. “We thought it wouldn't need a lid because the sleeves don't, but maybe it's more like the bag since it's more enclosed than a sleeve.”

Wei Wuxian looked thoughtful as he mulled over the idea. “Maybe,” he agreed. “We'll have to write that down and test it later.”

He paused when he saw Lan Xichen at Nie Mingjue's side, his eyes widening when he realized there was a guest from another sect there, even if it was a somewhat familiar one. Wei Wuxian nudged Nie Yang with an elbow and then bowed politely, the younger boy hastily copying him.

“Xichen-ge, please forgive us for our lapse in not greeting you,” Wei Wuxian said as he rose back up to his full height. Lan Xichen smiled warmly at him.

“There's nothing to forgive,” he said. “We just came here to make sure everything was alright after the explosion.”

“We would've sent word if there was something wrong,” Meng Shi assured him, setting down her embroidery on the bench beside her, “but thank you for coming nonetheless, Lan-gongzi.”

“Of course, Meng-furen,” Lan Xichen said with a small nod in her direction. “Actually...” He turned to Nie Mingjue. “Where is your brother?”

Nie Mingjue shook his head. “I'm not sure. Wei Wuxian?”

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “Probably in his room. He mentioned he needed to answer some letters.”

“I can go get him,” Nie Yang offered. Nie Mingjue nodded, dismissing him with a wave of his hand. The boy hurried off, robes flapping around his ankles.

“Hm. He's going through another growth spurt,” Nie Mingjue muttered, noting how much of Nie Yang's boots showed under his robes.

“I'll let the tailors know.”

Nie Mingjue looked over to see that Mo Meifen had risen from her seat and stepped out of the range of the muffling talisman, her son glancing up before returning to his book when he saw that nothing too interesting was going on. “Thank you. I'm sure he'll like having clothes that actually fit.”

Mo Meifen laughed. “He'll likely grow out of the new ones in a few months,” she said. “Such is the way of children everywhere. Still, I'll get him to the tailors in the next few days.”

Nie Huaisang and Nie Yang arrived a few minutes later, and once the various greetings were done, Lan Xichen produced two small packages from his sleeve and handed them to Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian. “I was going to leave these with Mingjue-*xiong*, but since we're all here anyways, I figured you might want them now. They are your invitations and pass tokens to the Cloud Recesses. You've been invited to study there as guest disciples in a fortnight's time. Make sure to have those invitations on you when you arrive; otherwise, you will have to wait outside the main gate until someone is able to come verify who you are and let you in.”

“We'll take good care of them,” Wei Wuxian said, immediately handing his over to Nie Huaisang, who sighed before putting both packages into a *qiankun* pouch on his belt. Wei Wuxian may have intelligence coming out of his ears, but he was often horrible at remembering where he'd put important things. He'd quickly learned that giving them to Nie Huaisang to keep hold of tended to mean they stayed in one place and were kept safe until he needed them later.

“Thank you for bringing them to us,” Nie Huaisang added. “It'll be interesting to see more than just the visitors' areas of the Recesses. How long are the classes again? I know *da-ge* only had to go for a few months during his fifteenth summer.”

“That was due to special circumstances,” Nie Mingjue said. “Usually it's, what, six months to a year?”

“It's six months this year,” Lan Xichen said. “From the end of summer to the beginning of spring to allow for travel.”

“Six months!” Nie Huaisang had almost forgotten just how long the classes had been given the monumental events that had happened afterwards. Those six months of peace, learning, and having fun had felt like they'd passed in a blink of an eye when compared to the seemingly interminable war and unrest that had followed afterward. “That's the longest we've ever been apart.”

“We were in Meishan for two months,” Wei Wuxian pointed out.

“Yes, but that-” Nie Huaisang huffed softly. “That was *different*.”

Wei Wuxian shot him a look. “How?”

“We had Yao-ge with us,” Nie Huaisang answered promptly. “This time it’ll just be *us*.” He waved his fan impatiently. “And the other guest disciples, but *still*.”

“Do you not want to go?”

“Of *course* I want to go, *da-ge*!” Nie Huaisang replied. “It’s just... It’ll be hard.”

Nie Mingjue put a hand on his brother’s shoulder and squeezed it gently. “You can still write to me.”

“Letters take *forever*, though.”

“What if they didn’t?”

They turned to look at Nie Yang, who blushed faintly from the sudden attention but forged on regardless. “I, uh, I had an idea, but I’ll need Wei-xiong’s help with it since he’s better at making permanent talismans and small arrays than me,” he said.

“Go on,” Nie Mingjue encouraged. He’d kept careful watch on Nie Yang over the years, but given the drastic changes in his life, he was an almost different person from the prior timeline. He still had his fits of temper and tendencies towards dark humor, but he didn’t show any signs of the murderous man he’d been in that now-forgotten future. He’d almost immediately adopted both Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang as his brothers in all but blood, though as the years had passed, he’d gravitated more toward Wei Wuxian, especially after seeing how his intelligence was celebrated and carefully honed rather than scorned.

“Well, I was thinking that letters can get lost and take a long time to get anywhere, and then I remembered the Jin have that spiritual messenger butterfly, which doesn’t take that long to get places,” Nie Yang continued on. “But the butterfly is obvious and only the Jin know how it’s done. What if we could link two blank books or journals with a permanent array or talismans so when one person wrote in it, the other person could see it a minute or two later?”

Wei Wuxian tilted his head back as he considered the idea. “It could work, but we’d have to make sure the journals aren’t able to be read by anyone but the person they belong to. Have them seal against other people like how some swords do, but on purpose.”

“I’ll leave you two to work it out,” Nie Mingjue said. “Just let me know what materials you’ll need. If it works, it works, but I don’t want you neglecting your other duties in favor of working on this, either. Which reminds me...” He glanced up at the sun. “You’ve got weapons practice in about a half hour. Huaisang, finish up your letters and then join us in the training grounds. Wuxian, you too. Clean up here as well. A-Yang, you’re welcome to join us, but if you do, you’ll be working with Fang Bohai on practice swords instead of live steel.”

He looked at Lan Xichen. “You’re welcome to join us or watch if you like,” he offered. “We won’t be offended if you prefer to stay in where it’s cool, though.”

Lan Xichen shook his head. “I’d be happy to watch at the very least, though it has been some time since we sparred. Maybe once they’re done with training?”

Nie Mingjue grinned. “That sounds like a plan to me.” He looked at the boys. “Well? Off you go! Don’t make me come chasing after you either!”

There were scattered calls of “We won't, *da-ge!*” before Nie Yang and Wei Wuxian hurried into the workshop and Nie Huaisang went back to his quarters. Nie Mingjue shook his head in fond amusement.

“Those three will turn the world on its head one of these days,” he said with a chuckle.

“And hopefully in a very good way as well,” Lan Xichen said. “You may want to warn Wei Wuxian about the food at the Recesses. I know he prefers spicier food than most, and our food is quite the opposite.”

“I remember.” Nie Mingjue bowed politely to the two women and Mo Xuanyu before leading his friend out of the courtyard. “I'll make sure to send him with plenty of chili oil, don't worry. Are you sure your uncle won't mind?”

Lan Xichen laughed, the warm sound making Nie Mingjue's stomach flip-flop pleasantly. It had always been like that, and having the added weight of knowing how precious that laugh was only made it more important that he find a way to preserve it, and perhaps in the process, himself, so he could hear it more and more often.

“*Shufu* will simply have to learn to deal with it,” he said. “Besides, there are no rules prohibiting spice, merely gluttony.”

Nie Mingjue nodded, clasping his hands behind his back. “I... worry about how the rules will affect my brothers,” he admitted as they walked. “Huaisang not as much, but Wuxian is...” He hummed, trying to find the best words. “Very free-spirited. He might chafe at so many rules to follow. Most of them make sense, of course, but he may butt heads against those that seem to go against his very being.”

“Like what?”

“No excess noise, for one,” Nie Mingjue said dryly. “He thinks best when he can talk through things, even if it's to himself. From what I remember of your uncle, *Lan-qianbei* does not tolerate that kind of thing very well.”

“Hm. Even so, the punishment for causing that kind of trouble is very simple. Kneeling in reflection for an hour or copying a section of the rules once or twice, for example,” Lan Xichen said. “I'll keep an eye on him just in case, though.”

“Your uncle or Wei Wuxian?”

“Both.”

Two weeks later, Nie Huaisang, Wei Wuxian, and Meng Yao found themselves making the trip to Gusu as planned. The steps up to the Cloud Recesses were as daunting as ever, especially in the heat that clung to the land near the base of the mountain, but as they climbed, the air got cool enough that the occasional shiver passed over Nie Huaisang's skin. He ran his hands over his arms and then circulated a bit of spiritual energy through his system to lend some warmth. Yet another thing he'd forgotten about the Cloud Recesses, as the guest disciple robes had carefully embroidered arrays embroidered within them to account for the chillier atmosphere, and the robes

he'd worn as an adult had similar ones, though they had adjusted for differing climates rather than just warding away the cold.

The next chance I get, Nie Huaisang thought as the small party approached the main gate to the Cloud Recesses that afternoon, I'm going to get the seamstresses and tailors to add those arrays to all of my clothes.

They paused at the gate long enough to show their invitations and the jade tokens that Lan Xichen had given them (a temporary pass had been issued for Meng Yao to allow him to bring Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian there; he would be traveling home the next day after the saluting ceremony) to the guards, waiting until everything had been inspected before they were allowed to go in. A junior Lan disciple was waiting for them at the top of the path, bowing politely and then leading them to the guest disciple quarters that had been set aside for them. Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian were to share one large room for the duration of their stay there, while Meng Yao was given a smaller guest room since he was only staying the one night.

Nie Huaisang was more than glad to start unpacking the various large and small *qiankun* bags they'd brought with them in lieu of chests and crates, putting his clothes in the appropriate storage chests and cabinets on his side of the room in order to avoid wrinkles. While they would mainly be wearing the guest disciple robes with their sect motif printed on the shoulders of the outer robes, he knew there would be times when wearing his own clothes would be preferable.

Nie Huaisang glanced over at Wei Wuxian, laughing quietly when he saw that his *shidi* was sprawled out on his bed, his boots the only thing he'd removed before he'd laid down.

“Taking a nap?”

“Trying to,” Wei Wuxian replied, crossing his arms behind his head. “Though if you keep making noise, I'll be up all night.”

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes. “If you sleep away the day, you'll be up all night,” he retorted. “You *did* hear that we have to be up by five in the morning, right?”

Wei Wuxian lifted his head in surprise. “What?”

“It's part of the rules. Out of bed at five and in bed by nine in the evening. *Da-ge* told me.”

“Why didn't he tell *me*?”

“Likely because he knew you'd whine about it.”

Nie Huaisang finished unpacking and then placed his sword against the wall near his bed. His fans were already hanging from his belt, the metal of the outside guards glinting in the lantern-light. The weaponsmiths of the Meishan Yu had taken inspiration from the *gunsen* of the islands of Ribēn, creating two fans with lightweight steel guards and ribs in place of the usual wood or bamboo supports. The fans had different designs on the lacquered paper leaves within them; one had a scene of red and orange autumnal leaves swirling across its white leaf- its name was Dafeng, or *Strong Wind* -while the other had a scene of a snowy landscape with birds crossing the sky painted on the black leaf. Its name was Lengfeng, or *Cold Wind*. The fans lived up to their names, able to direct blasts of strong or cold winds when Nie Huaisang pushed enough spiritual energy through them.

The fans also had a more direct method of protecting him, as if he ran his thumbs over certain characters engraved along the outside of the fans and fed spiritual energy into them, the ends of the fans' ribs became extremely sharp, and, depending on if they were opened or closed, could be either slashing or thrusting weapons if he was in too-close quarters to effectively use his sword. He hadn't come back from Meishan with a saber, but rather the thinner *jian*-style swords favored by most of the cultivation world, as had Wei Wuxian.

It was named Yaotou, or *Head-shaker*, both as a nod toward his past/once-future title and as a way to trick people into thinking he was following the Qinghe Nie tradition of bestowing his weapon with a fearsome name. After all, only four people in the whole world knew that it didn't mean that his sword was so fearsome as to set people trembling from head to toe, so Nie Huaisang was more than content in his little inside joke.

Some of the newer disciples had dared to comment on the sword, wondering how Nie Huaisang could be considered a proper Nie if he didn't use a saber like the rest of them. Nie Mingjue had stared at them long enough for them to get nervous before flatly stating that a cleaver wasn't the only tool in a butcher's arsenal and then ran them through some of the more intense sword drills until they'd nearly passed out just to hammer the point home.

No one had commented on Nie Huaisang's choice of weapon again after that.

Wei Wuxian had once again named his sword Suibian, because he still had the worst sense of humor regardless of what sect he'd been raised in. It made Nie Huaisang oddly happy, though, as it meant that while they'd changed so much since they'd returned to the past, the core personalities of the people he'd loved and lost (and, in some cases, underhandedly found again) trended towards staying similar to how they'd been before.

Nie Huaisang finished putting his things away, quickly sketched out a talisman that would make a noise like a bell chiming half an hour before dinner, and then stuck it over Wei Wuxian's bed before leaving the guest room. He slowly strolled along the familiar pathways, half-forgotten memories of his first time spent there flitting in and out of his mind. When he came across a bridge spanning over a gently burbling creek, he paused there, resting his hands on the arched railing as he leaned against it.

The next six months were going to be hard. Not only being away from his brother for so long, but also seeing the faces of people he'd last seen either dead or dying. Nie Huaisang knew he'd been lucky during the Sunshot Campaign, staying tucked away in the Unclean Realm once he'd returned from the Nightless City and the indoctrination camp. It had rankled to know that his brother, sect mates, and friends were out on the battlefield and could die at any moment, but Nie Huaisang recognized that at the time, he would've been useless as anything save for perhaps an aide of some kind, as he'd certainly not had the want or desire then to have even as much martial training as he did now.

“Huaisang? Are you alright?”

Nie Huaisang startled, his hands slipping off the railing and going to his fans at his waist before he realized who was speaking to him.

“Oh! Xichen-ge. I didn't-”

Nie Huaisang took in a steadying breath before drawing Lengfeng and snapping it open with a flick of his wrist. If he didn't channel any spiritual power through his weapons, there weren't any issues

with using them like regular fans. He fanned himself and shot Lan Xichen a small smile. “I was lost in thought. You caught me by surprise.”

“I didn't mean to startle you,” Lan Xichen said, tucking his hands into his sleeves. “I was out walking and saw you from the path. I wanted to say hello and see how you're doing.”

“Thank you. It's good to see you, as always.” He paused. “I haven't heard from Wangji-*xiong* in a while. Is he alright?”

“Oh, yes, he's just been in secluded meditation for the past half-month or so. He'll be joining your group for some of the lessons.”

Nie Huaisang smiled. He'd certainly become closer to Lan Wangji over the past six years than he had ever been in the prior timeline, and he attributed it to the fact that he'd pretty much followed in Wei Wuxian's footsteps and not given the other teen a choice in the matter at the start. He would've understood if Lan Wangji decided that he no longer wanted to exchange letters, so he'd been pleasantly surprised when the letters kept coming with a surprising amount of regularity. They exchanged letters at least twice a month, if not more, and Nie Huaisang looked forward to each one.

The letters he received from Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan were very good as well, though perhaps not as frequent. Nie Huaisang had never really thought of it the first time around, but being part of the ruling family of a Sect, be that as an heir or second in line, was a lonely position to grow up in, even with various other disciples all around. Having friends who wanted to know just them as a person first rather than because of their position must've been like giving a dehydrated person water, and the other three had soaked it up eagerly.

Nie Huaisang had found himself enjoying it as well, much to his own surprise. He'd initially conceived of the letters as a way to make connections and alliances well before the classes at the Cloud Recesses, but over time he'd come to realize that he'd been as equally lonely the first time around, even with his brother by his side. Now, though... Well, he certainly couldn't say he was lonely, especially when Wei Wuxian was involved.

“It'll be good to see him,” he said. “The last time we saw one another in person was that Discussion Conference in Lanling if I remember right. I'm still surprised you managed to get him there.”

Lan Xichen chuckled. “It didn't hurt that you were there,” he said. “Wangji is not much for things like that, so it was good that he had you to count on. I'm just sorry that he missed Wei Wuxian.”

Nie Huaisang shook his head. “Wei Wuxian was back home with a broken leg,” he said, rolling his eyes in fond exasperation. “He'd fallen off the roof of his workshop and tried to convince everyone he was fine. The doctors eventually had to confine him to bed until they were able to reset it and get it healed. He was very disappointed he couldn't go, but it's probably for the best. Jin Zixuan showed off his new spiritual dog while we were there, and Wei Wuxian is still not very fond of anything bigger than just above knee height when it comes to dogs.”

He and Nie Mingjue had made sure to expose Wei Wuxian to dogs in safe and controlled situations over the years, starting with new puppies and going from there. The kennels in the Unclean Realm were kept clean and warm, and the puppies tended to be fat fuzzballs that were more interested in tumbling around with one another or snuggling depending on how old they were, so they didn't set off Wei Wuxian's flight instinct like larger dogs did.

“Ah, you still breed *Songshi-Quan*?”

“Of course. They're good hunting dogs and sell quite well too,” Nie Huaisang said. “But anyways, I'm excited to see Wangji-*xiong*.” He laughed. “And now he'll be able to actually meet Wei Wuxian properly.”

“That will be... interesting, I'm sure.” Lan Xichen shook his head. “I'm sure we'll find out tomorrow.” He sighed softly. “I'll be helping Uncle at the Saluting Ceremony, but he'll be handling the classes himself after that.”

“I'll make sure to keep on his good side, then,” Nie Huaisang said dryly. He folded his fan and then bowed politely to Lan Xichen. “If you'll excuse me, I'd best go make sure Wei Wuxian is up and ready for dinner. He was resting when I left our quarters.”

“I'll see you at dinner, then,” Lan Xichen said as he bowed back. Nie Huaisang gave him one last smile and then headed back towards the guest quarters, feeling cautiously optimistic about the days to come.

That optimism was dimmed the next morning when he found Wei Wuxian half-dressed and smelling like Emperor's Smile. Nie Huaisang swore softly and then nudged his *shidi* with his boot. Wei Wuxian flailed sleepily at him and then turned over in his bed, clutching his blankets to his chest.

“Wei Wuxian, get up!” Nie Huaisang demanded, grabbing hold of the one edge of the blankets that his brother hadn't managed to tuck underneath him and pulling sharply. Wei Wuxian yelped as he was pulled out of bed along with the blankets, landing on the floor with a dull thud.

“Huaisang, it's way too early to get up,” Wei Wuxian groaned. “Let me sleep.”

“No. You smell like alcohol and bad decisions,” Nie Huaisang retorted. “You need a bath and a talking to, and since *da-ge* isn't here to do the latter, I'll do it for him.”

“Are you going to draw an ink mustache?”

Nie Huaisang huffed. “That was *one* time when I was twelve and it was- You know what, never mind. Where did you get alcohol, anyways? You didn't have any when we went to bed.”

“I snuck out and went down to Caiyi Town to get some,” Wei Wuxian said, sitting up and rubbing at his head. “I was going to bring you back a jar, but it got smashed.”

“How did it-” Nie Huaisang stopped as he remembered what had happened last time. “Oh gods. Did you get caught?”

Wei Wuxian grinned. “Maaaybe. But honestly, Huaisang-*ge*, I didn't mean to. I had to climb over the wall and the jars clinking together probably caught the attention of the patrol.” He hummed. “He was very handsome. I tried to explain that I didn't know the rule about the alcohol, but he tried to fight me. It was pretty rude. That's when the second jar smashed.”

“And the first?”

“Well, I drank it, didn't I?” Wei Wuxian got to his feet and put his blankets back on his bed. “And then I got dragged to see Lan Xichen and Lan-*qianbei*. You'll never guess what was there!”

Nie Huaisang rubbed at the bridge of his nose. In all his planning, he'd forgotten how the first night of Wei Wuxian's stay in the Cloud Recesses had gone, and apparently it was too much to ask for his brother in all but blood to ignore the siren songs of good alcohol and the possibility of mischief.

“A dragon,” he said dryly.

“Even better!” Wei Wuxian lowered his voice, as if he expected eavesdroppers to suddenly climb out of the woodwork at quarter past five in the morning. “A fierce corpse!”

“How is that better?”

“Oh, come on, don't you want to know how it happened?”

“I think we'd better focus on getting through the Saluting Ceremony and then classes,” Nie Huaisang said. “And...” He paused, worrying his lip. “I know we've been researching resentful energy because of the sabers, but we probably shouldn't talk about it a lot beyond generalities.”

Wei Wuxian waved it off as he used a talisman to fill the tub behind the privacy screen in the corner. It'd been born of laziness, mainly, as he hated getting water for washing in the morning, so he'd come up with a way to conjure water without having to physically go to the nearest well. Another talisman saw the water heated to the correct temperature, and soon Wei Wuxian was clean and getting dried off. Nie Huaisang changed the water out for clean with another talisman, washed, dried himself off, and then got dressed, pulling on the white robes with the Nie motif on the shoulders.

He looked over to see Wei Wuxian picking up Suibian, his damp hair pulled back in its usual high horsetail with small Nie-style braids leading from his temples and then wrapping around the base of the horsetail below the simple silver hairpiece he wore. Nie Huaisang smiled to himself before taking care of his own hair and accessories, making sure to grab Yaotou once he was done.

Meng Yao met them outside with the gift for Lan Qiren in hand, the ornately decorated box held carefully with his sword hanging from his belt. Wei Wuxian smiled brightly at him.

“Yao-ge! How did your night go?”

Meng Yao arched an eyebrow at the effusive greeting. “Well enough,” he said. “And yours?”

Nie Huaisang sighed. “Mine was uneventful. Wei Wuxian's... less so.”

“I'm sure Nie-*zongzhu* will be interested to hear about that,” Meng Yao said dryly. Wei Wuxian huffed.

“You have no faith in me,” he said with a brief pout.

“No, we just know you,” Nie Huaisang countered as they headed toward the dining hall. Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes at that, his pout becoming more exaggerated as they got their meals and settled in at a table. The food was eaten in near silence, as per the rules, though true to form, Wei Wuxian added a good helping of spice to his congee before tucking in.

It was a good thing we brought plenty of chili oil with us, Nie Huaisang thought as he ate his own undoctored food. Though we may have to go into town at some point and get more if he keeps going through so much of it in one sitting.

They made their way to the classroom, Meng Yao taking a seat behind Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian to his left. Nie Huaisang regretted not having been able to catch the canary he'd captured the first time around, but he hadn't wanted to draw too much attention to himself. Besides, he could always get more birds once he was back home in Qinghe.

Once the group salutation was over, the class settled in for the recitation of the famous (or infamous, depending on who one asked) Lan rules. Nie Huaisang let his mind wander a bit as the rules were recited, occasionally shifting his weight from foot to foot in order to keep his circulation going. He occasionally glanced over at Wei Wuxian, amused at the glazed over look in his *shidi's* eyes. The rules seemed to stretch on forever, and when the final one ("Don't neglect your studies") was read out, Nie Huaisang gave a quiet sigh of relief, even if it meant he had to be on his feet for a little while longer.

The presentation of Jin Zixuan and the gift to Lan Qiren went much the same as before, and all too soon, the senior disciple who'd been reading out the rules signaled for the Nie contingent to come up. Nie Huaisang, Wei Wuxian, and Meng Yao made their way to the center of the room, with Meng Yao a pace behind and to the right of Nie Huaisang.

Nie Huaisang lifted his hands in front of him, Wei Wuxian copying his motions.

"Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian from the Nie Sect of Qinghe, here to visit the Grand Master," he said before the three of them performed the appropriate salutations. He continued on once he was back on his feet. "To represent the Nie Sect, we present the dark red sand elixir pot."

Meng Yao stepped forward, his gaze trained down on the floor as was appropriate. "Head Deputy Meng Yao from the Nie Sect, here to present the dark red sand elixir pot on behalf of Nie-zongzhu. The dark red sand is antique and solemn, plain but profound; just like the qualities of Grand Master Lan. I hope the Grand Master will accept it."

Nie Huaisang frowned faintly when he heard the not-so-subtle whispers coming from a pair of guest disciples in the far corner of the room. They spoke of Meng Yao's background in less than pleasant terms, and Nie Huaisang had to subtly hold out a hand to stop Wei Wuxian from going over to teach the two gossipers a lesson. Meng Yao had never gone to Lanling to try and speak with his father in this timeline, as his mother had quickly become disillusioned with Jin Guangshan's supposed greatness after living alongside Mo Meifen for so long and hearing of the Sect leader's habits of tossing women aside like yesterday's trash when he got tired of them, and had stopped trying to get him to go and be recognized.

Nonetheless, the news that Meng Yao was more than likely one of Jin Guangshan's unrecognized children had gotten around the cultivation world, though Jin Guangshan had been suspiciously quiet about the whole thing. Jin Zixuan had kept a polite distance throughout the years, not wanting to anger his mother, but had still maintained good relations with the Nie sect nonetheless.

Nie Huaisang grit his teeth and then put on his blandest, most polite expression before bowing to Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren.

"I beg the Grand Master's pardon, but I have a question before the presentation continues," he said, his voice ringing clear throughout the room. Lan Qiren's eyebrows rose minutely before he

answered.

“Go ahead.”

“As we just heard, the esteemed Lan Sect has many rules governing how one may live a virtuous and correct life,” Nie Huaisang said, breezily ignoring the looks he was getting from both Wei Wuxian and Meng Yao. Both of them knew that when Nie Huaisang had that particular tone in his voice, someone was going to get in trouble, and it wasn't always them. “If I remember correctly, one of them is *Be careful with your words*, while another is *Do not speak ill of others*. Is my memory correct, Lan-qianbei?”

“You are correct, Young Master Nie,” Lan Qiren replied as he glanced over at the two gossipers, who immediately fell silent under the weight of his disapproving gaze. “Your memory serves you well. I should hope others follow in your example of remembering and acting upon them.”

Nie Huaisang bowed again, fighting back a smirk. “Thank you, Grand Master. My apologies for interrupting.”

Lan Xichen stepped forward to take the gift, taking it with kind words toward Meng Yao and the eloquence of his speech. Nie Huaisang watched the two of them interact out of the corner of his eye, pleased to see it go just as well as it had last time, though perhaps even better since the two of them had met and interacted more than just once before that day. As they returned to their places, Wei Wuxian nudged Nie Huaisang.

“Good job,” he muttered as the representatives for the Baling Ouyang sect came forward to present their gift to Lan Qiren.

Nie Huaisang nodded, finally allowing a small smile to surface. The rest of the presentations passed slowly, and Nie Huaisang only stirred himself out of a vague stupor when Jiang Cheng stepped forward to present his gift. If it went the same as last time, then...

The arrogant and grating voice of Wen Chao interrupted Jiang Cheng before he could even finish his introduction, making the whole room tense. Nie Huaisang let his hands drop near his waist, his fingertips brushing over the blunt end of Dafeng, which was hanging from his belt. Lengfeng was tucked away in his *qiankun* sleeve, ready to be drawn at any moment. He kept his eyes on Wen Chao, even though he was sorely tempted to look over at Wen Ning and Wen Qing, and drew Dafeng off his belt.

He opened it quietly, the movement catching Wei Wuxian's eyes. Nie Huaisang subtly shook his head, but Wei Wuxian ignored him and began to speak, much to Nie Huaisang's annoyance.

“Wen-gongzi, if the Wen Sect has no need of lessons from others, then why are you here?”

Wen Chao scoffed. “Who is this yapping dog?”

“I'm no yapping dog,” Wei Wuxian said proudly. “I'm Wei Wuxian from Qinghe Nie.”

“Qinghe Nie?” Wen Chao sneered. “Someone from such a pitiful sect dares to interrupt me? Worthless.”

Wei Wuxian tensed, fingers curling in his sleeves, and Nie Huaisang knew he had to act fast.

“Ah, Wen-*gongzi*, the Jiang disciples were saluting just now,” he said, fluttering his fan and playing up the mask of a meek scholar as much as he dared without going too overboard. “There's no need for harsh words. We're all here to learn from the esteemed Grand Master, after all, and want to represent our sects in the best and brightest lights, yes? The Wen sect is indeed accomplished, but I'm sure every accomplished master can learn new things to add to their greatness. Otherwise, the world continues turning and soon those who were once great are left behind. Surely it's to everyone's benefit to keep learning and growing?”

Wen Chao looked torn between wanting to lap up the praise towards his sect and sneering at Nie Huaisang for daring to speak. He waved a hand dismissively in Nie Huaisang's direction.

“Whatever.” He gestured for Wen Qing and Wen Ning to step forward. The siblings bowed to Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren before Wen Qing spoke.

“I am Wen Qing from the Qishan Wen Sect, here under orders of His Excellency to attend the lecture. My brother Wen Ning and I are new to the Cloud Recesses and apologize for any trouble we may have caused by arriving late,” she said. “We hope that we may be forgiven.”

As she spoke, she gave Wen Ning her sword and then took the lacquered box he carried, holding it out to Lan Xichen. Lan Xichen waited until his uncle gave the go-ahead before taking the box and accepting Wen Qing's apology. The tense atmosphere remained until the Wen contingent left and Jiang Cheng was able to finish his salutation and gift giving, though it was certainly less enthusiastic than it had previously been.

Nie Huaisang waited until the ceremony was finally over and they were released to pull Wei Wuxian down a quiet side path to talk with him.

“What was that with the Wen?” he asked, keeping his voice down. “You shouldn't have said anything.”

“You did,” Wei Wuxian pointed out. “And you did that thing with Meng Yao.”

“The first was to make sure a fight didn't break out, and the second was because I wasn't about to let Yao-ge be insulted in front of all those people,” Nie Huaisang retorted. “You were going to do something too.”

“Yeah, but you stopped me,” Wei Wuxian grumbled.

“You didn't have to speak up for me.”

The two boys turned to see Meng Yao standing nearby, watching them speak.

“Of course I did, Yao-ge,” Nie Huaisang said immediately. “You can't help the circumstances of your birth any more than the rest of us can, but you shouldn't be known just for that. You should be known for all the amazing things you've done and the rank you've rightfully earned.”

“Yeah!” Wei Wuxian agreed.

Nie Huaisang was aware that his and Nie Mingjue's fierce devotion to defending Meng Yao had primarily been born out of the need to keep him from becoming the sickly parody of a once-good man who held the name Jin Guangyao, but over the years it had morphed into something more, especially when Meng Yao had mostly let go of the idea that he needed his father's validation to

actually have any meaning in the world. They had wanted to show Meng Yao that he could earn accolades and prestige on his own terms without having to rely on his father's name, and if it meant defending him and making him feel like the integral part of the sect that he was, then so be it.

“Still,” Meng Yao said, “I’m used to it by now.” He shook his head with a fond smile. “Though I doubt the two of you will ever stop, no matter how many times I might ask.”

“Never,” Nie Huaisang confirmed. “You’re our brother and we protect our family, even if we’re not related by blood.”

“Especially then,” Wei Wuxian added. He slung an arm around Nie Huaisang’s shoulders. “How soon do you have to go?”

Meng Yao hummed, thinking. “I’ll be leaving before lunch,” he said. “That way I can get back home just before sundown since I don’t have to worry about taking a horse.”

“That’s not too far away.”

“No, so you’d best say your goodbyes now,” Meng Yao agreed. “Nie-zongzhu requested I pass along some letters to Lan Xichen before I go, and I haven’t had the chance to do that yet.”

They said their goodbyes, albeit reluctantly, and then Meng Yao went to deliver the letters he’d been given. Wei Wuxian sighed and leaned against Nie Huaisang.

“Six months doing nothing but studying and tests,” he said with an exaggerated groan. “This is going to be *boring*.”

Nie Huaisang laughed and patted him on the back.

“With you around? I highly doubt it.”

Wen Ning was glad to see the back of Wen Chao, breathing a sigh of relief when he and the guards accompanying him left the Cloud Recesses altogether. Once he and Wen Qing had been assigned rooms- though in different areas of the guest disciple wings, as they were strictly segregated -they were free to wander the grounds. Wen Ning was tempted to search out Nie Huaisang, but after second thoughts, figured it’d be better if they ran into one another seemingly randomly. After all, it would be hard to explain how they knew one another, especially since Wen Ning wasn’t of the mainline branch of the Sect and therefore didn’t have much political clout nor would he have had much chance to interact with the heirs of other Sects..

He sighed and fought the urge to stick his hands into his sleeves, though it was a narrow battle. Wen Ning didn’t want to go back to the Nightless City, and six months would bring a lot of change if things went similarly to how they did in the prior timeline. He just hoped that the choice would be an easy one when the time came. His feet carried him along the paths as he got lost in thought, and it wasn’t until the sound of the river rushing by caught his attention that he realized he’d come to the clearing where he’d first properly met Wei Wuxian.

Wen Ning was surprised to see that it wasn’t empty this time, however, as the familiar form of Nie Huaisang was sitting under a tree. He held a book in one hand and was idly playing with a fan in the other, though the fan was nothing like Wen Ning had ever seen him use before. Wen Ning

paused at the edge of the clearing and then, with a deliberate motion, kicked a rock to skitter across the ground some dozen feet in front of Nie Huaisang to get his attention.

It worked, and quite well, too. Nie Huaisang looked sharply up, his idle movements freezing until he registered just who was there. When he focused on Wen Ning, a brilliant smile illuminated his face, catching Wen Ning off-guard. He was helpless to resist returning the smile as Nie Huaisang scrambled to his feet, his book set hastily aside.

“Wen Ning!”

“Nie-*gongzi*,” Wen Ning replied, closing the gap between the two of them until they were at a comfortable speaking distance. Nie Huaisang waved his fan impatiently.

“Oh, no, you- Wait a moment.”

He drew out a talisman from his sleeve and tossed it on the ground with a flick of his fingers. An almost imperceptible privacy ward surrounded them, the only marker of its presence a faint heat shimmer in the air. They could hear and see anyone outside of it, but if anyone chanced upon them, they'd immediately be filled with the urge to be elsewhere and out of hearing and sight range.

“There. Now, enough of the formalities,” Nie Huaisang said, closing his fan and hanging it from his belt. “You of all people can use my name, especially in private.”

“I...” Wen Ning hesitated. “I don't know about that.”

“Then maybe Nie-*xiong*?” Nie Huaisang suggested. “But honestly, I really don't mind.” He reached out and placed a hand on Wen Ning's forearm, his grasp firm but nothing Wen Ning couldn't pull away from if he wanted to. “How've you been? It's been a while since your last letter.”

“Maybe we should sit down,” Wen Ning said. “There's a lot to tell.”

Nie Huaisang nodded, picked up the talisman, and then headed back to the tree, the privacy ward traveling with him. Wen Ning followed after him, settling down on the ground under the tree once the talisman was in place on its trunk.

“So, talk to me. It's been, what, a month?”

“Uh... Yes. I'm sorry about that.” Wen Ning folded his hands in his lap. “So... Wen Xu is dead.”

Nie Huaisang froze. “What? How?”

“He fell off his horse during a pheasant hunt when one left cover right in front of it,” Wen Ning said. “He didn't die last time because Wen Zhuliu had been there to keep his horse from bolting. This time, though...”

“This time, it bolted,” Nie Huaisang finished.

“And kicked Wen Xu in the head after he'd been thrown from the saddle.” Wen Ning shook his head. “I would've told you sooner, but all the messenger ravens were busy for that whole month, and by the time they weren't, we were already on our way here.”

“Wen Ruohan didn't announce anything,” Nie Huaisang mused. “This is the first I've head of it, and I know *da-ge* would've said something if he'd heard anything.”

“Wen-zongzhu purposefully banned the news from spreading,” Wen Ning explained. “He didn’t want to seem weak, I suppose. Wen Xu was properly mourned, of course, but the news was never released to the greater world. Wen Chao has been even more insufferable after becoming heir. I... I was glad that he didn’t pull a sword this time.”

Nie Huaisang laughed dryly as he picked up his book again. “Only just. I should’ve known Wei Wuxian couldn’t stay quiet. He’s never done well with bullies, and changing the sect he grew up in hasn’t done a thing about that.”

A small smile curved Wen Ning’s lips. It was nice to know that some things were constant, and Wei Wuxian’s sense of justice and intolerance of bullies were some of those things. He leaned back against the tree trunk, the peaceful surroundings and Nie Huaisang’s warmth at his side helping to ease the tangle of his thoughts.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said after a long moment of comfortable silence. Nie Huaisang made an interrogative sound, surprised by the comment.

“Yeah?”

“I am,” Wen Ning continued on. “The first time around, I didn’t really have anyone to talk to save for *jiejie* and Wei Wuxian. I’m glad I have you as well now.”

Nie Huaisang looked down at his book, the faintest of blushes tinging his cheeks.

“I’m glad you’re here too, Wen Ning,” he said, barely audible over the rush of the nearby water. Wen Ning closed his eyes and relaxed, his breathing starting to slow into the steady rhythm of sleep as time went on.

The afternoon sun shone through the leaves of the tree, and as Wen Ning succumbed to the lure of sleep, Nie Huaisang kept his eyes open, his attention nominally fixed on his book. It was hard to concentrate, however, with Wen Ning’s warm presence next to him. Nie Huaisang eventually gave up on trying to read when Wen Ning shifted in his sleep and listed slowly toward him, his head coming to rest on Nie Huaisang’s shoulder.

Nie Huaisang didn’t dare move, well aware that Wen Ning wouldn’t have fallen asleep if he didn’t trust that he was completely safe. It was a heady feeling to know that the once-feared Ghost General trusted him enough to fall asleep on his shoulder, but it also made Nie Huaisang’s stomach turn in an unnervingly pleasant way that he didn’t quite know how to quantify.

Something to think about for sure, but perhaps not at that moment. For now, Nie Huaisang was content to soak in the peace and companionship that he’d sorely missed over the past few years.

Head in the Clouds (Watch Your Step)

Chapter Notes

Canon discussions about Qin Su's origins and Jin Guangshan's utter dickery, but it's a brief mention and nothing deep.

A month into their stay at the Cloud Recesses, the visiting disciples were given the task of making family trees of the ruling members of the various sects, Great and minor, in the hopes that having them memorize at least the two most recent generations would help to not cause offense when interacting in official situations like night hunts or discussion conferences. It took all of a day for Wei Wuxian to grow bored with looking in books or dealing with study groups when there were other things for him to be doing. After some testing, he managed to create a minor talisman that, when hit with a drop of blood and ink each and then placed against a piece of paper or a scroll, created a chart that showed a person's blood relations going back until the time of their great-grandparents.

It also included those related by marriage, though only as far back as their grandparents. For Wei Wuxian, the chart was very short, given that he was the sole surviving member of his family, but he was amused to see that Boashan Sanren stood in place of his mother's mother. He figured it had something to do with the master-student bond she and his mother had once shared, but figured only Boashan Sanren would know the exact details, and since he couldn't exactly ask her, he let it be.

For Nie Huaisang, he was pleased to see all three of his parents listed above his and Nie Mingjue's names. Their father had married his second wife while his first was still alive when it was discovered Nie Mingjue's mother couldn't have any more children due to a prior condition, and by all accounts, the three of them had been very happy together. Nie Huaisang's mother had died of illness when he was two, barely old enough to remember her beyond vague memories of soft touches and half-forgotten lullabies, and Nie Mingjue's mother had passed away two years before their father due to a night hunt gone wrong.

He lightly skimmed his fingers over the dried ink of his parents' names, a lop-sided smile pulling at his mouth. Wei Wuxian nudged him gently.

"You alright?" he asked, keeping his voice down just barely in deference to the quiet atmosphere of the shared study hall they were working in.

"Hm? Oh, I'm fine," Nie Huaisang assured him, looking up from the chart. He shot Wei Wuxian a thoughtful look. "You know, we could show the others this and then make copies of everyone's charts so we all have study materials."

"I suppose," Wei Wuxian mused, rubbing at his nose thoughtfully. "Think we should charge for it?"

Nie Huaisang shook his head. "No, not for this. Other things that they can't get but we can, sure, but this? It'd endear you to them more to share this and ease everyone's work. Not to mention it'd look good to Lan Qiren that we're all working together."

“I still say he has it out for me. I haven't even done anything truly obnoxious and he still goes at me like *da-ge* goes after training dummies when he's angry.”

Nie Huaisang sighed. It was true Lan Qiren tended to single out Wei Wuxian. He'd tried testing him with the question regarding the executioner just like last time, but thankfully Wei Wuxian had held his tongue and not pressed the issue of trying to use the resentful energy rather than using the prescribed methods.

“You could always ask him.”

Wei Wuxian snorted and then pointed his calligraphy brush at him. “I may be reckless, but I'm not *stupid*. So, should we tell the others?”

“Tell us what?”

The two looked up to find Jiang Cheng and a stiff-looking Jin Zixuan approaching the table they were at. Wei Wuxian smiled brightly at them.

“Ah, Jiang-*xiong*, Jin-*xiong*,” he said. “We were doing the lineage assignment. Why don't you come join us?”

Jiang Cheng sighed and then took a seat at one of the free sides of the table, Jin Zixuan sitting down at the final free spot. “I get why he wants us to do it, but it's *boring*.”

“Sometimes you have to do the boring stuff to get to the interesting stuff,” Nie Huaisang said. “That's what my training master told me, anyways.”

“And you don't want to piss off Master Deng,” Wei Wuxian agreed. “She's *scary*.”

“Your sword master?” Jin Zixuan asked.

Nie Huaisang shook his head. “She's not of the Nie.” He tilted his head toward Jiang Cheng. “She's of Meishan Yu. Anyways, once we get past this, we might be able to do more interesting things.”

“Speaking of...” Wei Wuxian tapped at Jiang Cheng's empty stack of papers with a finger. “I've come up with a way to make it go faster.”

Jiang Cheng narrowed his eyes. “How so?”

“Simple. It just takes a talisman, a drop of ink, and a drop of blood,” he said. He grabbed the sheet of paper he had his reference talisman sketched out on and placed it in the middle of the table. “Here. Put this on talisman paper, add the drops of ink and blood, and then put it on the piece of paper you want the lineage chart on.”

“It's safe,” Nie Huaisang assured the others. “I've already done it and nothing's blown up.”

Jiang Cheng still looked dubious but started copying out the talisman, following Wei Wuxian's strokes as neatly and precisely as he could. Nie Huaisang saw that Jin Zixuan hesitated in doing the same, and only a fool would be blind as to why.

“While you two are doing that, why don't Jin-*xiong* and I get more paper?”

Nie Huaisang wasted no time in getting up and all but pulling Jin Zixuan along with him. The other boy looked both confused and relieved as they moved away from the table and out of earshot of the others. Nie Huaisang bypassed the area where the paper and other supplies were kept, herding Jin Zixuan to a quiet corner of the library.

“You don't have to do the talisman if you don't want to,” he murmured, turning to look at Jin Zixuan with an understanding expression once they were stopped. “You can just write out the, uh, *official* lineage chart and no one will care.”

Jin Zixuan stared at the nearest bookshelf, his gaze fixed on the tomes there as if they held the secrets of the universe. He stayed silent for a long time, his hand clenching as if to grasp a scabbard for reassurance. It was something that Nie Huaisang had seen Jin Ling do so much that it sent a visceral pang through his chest. Jin Ling and the others would come into the world in their own time, he was sure of it. Or at least, so he fervently hoped.

“How about this? Put down the 'official' version of your lineage chart and then come by my room tonight after dinner,” Nie Huaisang suggested gently. “I don't think Lan-*laoshi* will mind us using what is expected. But... If you want to know the truth, you can. If you don't, no one is going to think badly of you.”

“I...” Jin Zixuan closed his eyes briefly as he collected himself. “I can't keep ignoring what my father has done. I don't... I don't want to become him. He disrespects Mother with his actions, and I can't... I can't be that kind of person.”

“Then don't.” Nie Huaisang shrugged when Jin Zixuan sent him a look.

“It can't be that easy.”

“No, probably not, but it's a choice you'll have to make regardless.” He smiled faintly. “Being an adult isn't going to be easy, sadly.” He nudged Jin Zixuan. “How're things with Jiang-*guniang*, by the way? The fact that you're working with Jiang-*xiong* is a good sign, right?”

Jin Zixuan rolled his eyes. “Jiang Yanli is very nice. You, uh, you were right about getting to know her through letters. Her brother is like a wet cat at times, though,” he said. Nie Huaisang's smile widened.

“Ah, that's just how he is,” he said, putting a hand on Jin Zixuan's shoulder. “Come on, let's go get that paper before those two get in trouble.”

“They would, wouldn't they?”

An hour after dinner was over, there was a knock at the door of Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian's room. They welcomed Jin Zixuan in, Wei Wuxian guiding him over to the table where a large sheet of blank talisman paper was set up. Nie Huaisang set up a privacy ward with a few quick motions before taking a seat across from Jin Zixuan.

“Whatever happens here will stay here unless you choose otherwise,” he promised. Wei Wuxian sat next to him, leaning back on his hands.

“We won't tell a soul, we promise. And... if it helps, we, uh, we already know who two of your half-siblings are,” Wei Wuxian said.

“I know of Meng Yao,” Jin Zixuan said, and then frowned. “Who's the other?”

“His name is Mo Xuanyu, and he's nine.” Wei Wuxian said. “He's one of our *shidis*. He and his mother came to Qinghe five years ago.”

Jin Zixuan stared at the paper with a deep frown. “Oh. I guess... Thank you for keeping them safe.”

“No problem. So, are you sure you want to do this?”

Jin Zixuan took in a deep breath, let it out slowly, and then nodded. “I have to know, if nothing else than to try and fix my father's mistakes.”

“They're not really yours to fix,” Nie Huaisang pointed out as Wei Wuxian handed over the example array for Jin Zixuan to copy. Jin Zixuan shook his head.

“It's still part of my legacy,” he said. Nie Huaisang sighed.

“If you say so.”

While Jin Zixuan worked, Nie Huaisang heated up a pot of water for tea on the small brazier that served to warm the whole room when it was cold. It wasn't a proper tea stove, but it worked well enough for the task nonetheless.

When the water was ready, Nie Huaisang busied himself with making the tea. It was a soothing task and one that didn't require him to think much. The outcome of that evening would change things even more than they already had been. He had no idea what would come of Jin Zixuan knowing the identities of his half-siblings, but at the very least Meng Yao would likely never marry Qin Su. That was a blessing, and if Nie Huaisang could just get his brother to move ahead with actually courting Meng Yao and Lan Xichen, that blessing could be assured.

He served the tea, making sure it was well away from the paper Jin Zixuan was finishing inking. Nie Huaisang handed Wei Wuxian a cup before taking a seat. He'd give Jin Zixuan a cup when the lineage chart was done. Jin Zixuan looked up after making the last stroke and set his brush aside.

“Now what?”

“Now you prick your finger to get a drop of blood, add a drop of ink, and then let them fall on the talisman,” Wei Wuxian instructed. It was the work of a moment for Jin Zixuan to do so, and then, with a steely determination Nie Huaisang wasn't used to seeing from him, the Jin heir tipped his hand and let the ink and blood mixture fall onto the talisman. There was a soft flash of light and then the ink that was already there started to shift and swirl around, forming new characters in different configurations.

Jin Zixuan sat back, watching intently until the ink went still and no more new names were added to the chart. He closed his eyes in mute acceptance, his shoulders slumping. Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang exchanged meaningful glances before Wei Wuxian reached out and carefully turned the chart to read the names. Nie Huaisang set down his tea and then leaned in, glancing over the names there.

There were five names beyond Jin Zixuan listed under Jin Guangshan as his offspring, the names of their mothers linked to the Sect leader by dotted lines rather than the solid line that linked him to Madam Jin. Meng Yao was the oldest, followed by Qin Su and then Jin Zixuan. Mo Xuanyu was after him, and then two names Nie Huaisang didn't recognize, which meant either that they hadn't known Jin Guangshan was their father in the first timeline or they hadn't cared to make it public. They were a pair of twins by the names of Fan Qiang and Fan Liu, though which was the eldest, it was hard to say. They were barely three years of age, something that had Nie Huaisang huffing sharply.

"Well," he said, turning the chart back to Jin Zixuan, "if you want us to track down Fan Qiang and Fan Liu, we can start working on it, but it might take some time."

"I just..." Jin Zixuan poured himself a cup of tea, and it was a testament to how rattled he was that he didn't bother to hide the shaking of his fingers from the others. "Qin Su... He... He slept with the wife of one of his most trusted allies? I don't get it. Why would she agree to that?"

"Ah. Um..."

Jin Zixuan looked up from his tea sharply. "What?"

Nie Huaisang took in a deep breath and let it out slowly before continuing on. "Are... are you sure she would've agreed? Your father can be very... demanding when he wants something."

Jin Zixuan went pale, the color draining from his face.

"You know what," Wei Wuxian said, getting to his feet, "I think we need something stronger than tea."

"Two glasses each and that's it," Nie Huaisang told him as he moved the chart away from the table. "And get those roasted peanuts you've been saving."

"But... Why would he-"

Nie Huaisang moved around the table to sit next to Jin Zixuan, figuring that he needed some physical support as well as emotional.

"I'm not saying that he forced her, but it's probably something we should take into account, especially since I know Madam Qin is very devoted to her husband," he said. "The only people who truly know are your father and Madam Qin, and for now, I doubt bringing it up would help anyone. I think the best thing you could do is to build up a quiet base of support for Qin Su since she's the one who has to deal with your sect the most."

"Maybe you could introduce her to Mianmian," Wei Wuxian suggested as he returned with a jar of Emperor's Smile and a bag of roasted peanuts. Jin Zixuan drained his cup of tea like it was wine and then set it on the table.

"Mianmian would probably adopt her as a sister out of spite if I told her who Qin Su really was to me," Jin Zixuan muttered, though there was no heat at all to his words. "She'll probably do it regardless of Qin Su's background, to be honest. Mianmian's always complaining that there aren't enough women around to talk with at court."

“Well, if you manage it, both of them could have friends in one another,” Wei Wuxian said, pouring out a cup of wine for each of them. “And hey, you could introduce them to Jiang-*guniang* and that way she probably won't feel as lonely when she marries you, right?”

Nie Huaisang snorted softly. “Wei Wuxian, the day I trust your romance advice is the day I fly without a sword,” he said. “You're a mess and you know it.”

“That wasn't romance advice, though!” Wei Wuxian countered. “Just common sense.”

“Which you're also often in short supply of,” Nie Huaisang teased, grabbing a few peanuts from the bag. Wei Wuxian made a sound like a cat getting its tail stepped on and made to go after him from across the table, but Nie Huaisang dodged him easily.

“Aiya, don't get *too* rowdy,” he warned. “For one, you'll attract too much attention, and for another, you'll spill your wine, and then you'll have to wait until we're able to go down to Caiyi Town to get more.”

Wei Wuxian sat back, an exaggerated pout on his face. “You're no fun, Nie-*xiong*.”

“Oh, I'm plenty of fun, Wei-*di*,” Nie Huaisang shot back with a laugh. “You just refuse to acknowledge it.”

“Are... Are you always like this?”

“We're brothers.” Wei Wuxian poured wine for the other two and then downed his first cup with a pleased sigh. “It's how we interact.”

“This is how brothers act?”

Nie Huaisang shrugged. “It's how *we* act, but not all brothers are the same way. Seriously, though, he's horrible about romantic advice, so I wouldn't recommend listening to him.”

“Rude.”

“But true,” Nie Huaisang said. “You flirt with everyone who's pretty.”

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “Why limit myself?”

“Does... Does Qinghe Nie not care about cut-sleeves?” Jin Zixuan asked as he picked up his cup with a puzzled expression.

“Not a bit. To us, love is love as long as no one is getting hurt.”

Nie Huaisang took a sip of his own wine before leaning back on one hand. “We may be warriors in practice, but we still have hearts that love, and if that love is shared between two men, two women, or a mixture, then so be it. My mothers loved one another and my father very much all at the same time, or so *da-ge* tells me.”

Jin Zixuan looked rather overwhelmed with the rapid amount of information he was getting and drained his cup, barely blinking at the sudden influx of alcohol. “Cut-sleeves aren't allowed in Lanling,” he said. “Or at least, not publicly.”

“More's the pity.” Wei Wuxian poured himself another cup. “And don't worry, I won't flirt with you. You're taken, after all.”

“No, you'd rather flirt with Lan Wangji.” Nie Huaisang finished off his cup of wine and poured himself and Jin Zixuan their second cups before taking the half-drunk bottle off the table and closing it up again. “How's that going for you?”

“Shut up. I'll get through to him yet. He can't hide behind that perfect stoic face forever.”

“You want to flirt with *Lan Wangji*?!”

“Aiya, shout it to the world, why don't you?” Wei Wuxian grumbled in response to Jin Zixuan's baffled exclamation. “He'll never flirt back. He keeps calling me 'shameless' and 'boring'. He'll probably forget about me once we're gone.”

Nie Huaisang put the wine away in the *qiankun* bag it had been stored in before their impromptu drinking session and then returned to the table, taking a new seat at the end and leaving one side free.

“I doubt it,” he said, picking up his cup and drinking its contents before Wei Wuxian could steal it from him. “You're pretty unforgettable. Besides, with the close relationship our two sects have, we'll see one another quite often throughout the year.”

Wei Wuxian considered that, brightening up considerably at the thought. “You're right! Maybe he'll get used to me over a longer period of time. I just have to wait it out.”

“You two are very odd,” Jin Zixuan told them.

“Well, you're our friend properly now, so you're included in the oddness,” Nie Huaisang said, and then laughed at the mix of surprise and dismay that set up on Jin Zixuan's face.

“Don't worry, we won't get you into *too* much trouble.”

“Somehow,” Jin Zixuan managed, “I highly doubt that.”

They saw him off back to the Jin quarters about a half hour later, Jin Zixuan taking the piece of paper with him tucked safely away in his sleeve. Later, as the two of them were settling in to sleep, Nie Huaisang heard Wei Wuxian speak.

“Do you think we did the right thing?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

Wei Wuxian pushed himself up on an elbow to look across the dimly lit room at Nie Huaisang. “With Jin-*xiong*, I mean.”

Nie Huaisang rolled over on his side to face his brother. “We didn't force him into anything,” he said after considering the question. “We just gave him options. What he did or didn't do with them was up to him, and it's still up to him on whether or not he acts on the information he now knows.”

Wei Wuxian propped his head up on his hand, but he was too far away for Nie Huaisang to see his expression clearly. “I guess, but I still feel kind of bad about it.”

“The only person who should feel bad about any of this is Jin-*zongzhu*,” Nie Huaisang said firmly. “He's the one who couldn't be bothered to be a decent human being and stay faithful to his wife.”

Wei Wuxian flopped onto his back, rearranging his blankets. “I guess.”

He was silent for a long moment, long enough that Nie Huaisang started to doze off, and then spoke again, his words drifting through the quiet of the room.

“You know what?”

“Hm?”

“Jin-*zongzhu* may be an idiot, but he gave us Yao-*ge*, so that's something.”

“One good thing born of an idiot doesn't make him any less of one,” Nie Huaisang mumbled. “Go to sleep, Wuxian.”

“Night, Huaisang.”

Nie Huaisang pulled the covers closer up over his shoulders and closed his eyes, drifting off to sleep with the familiar sounds of his brother's soft breathing in the background.

Nie Mingjue sighed as he stared down at the paperwork in front of him, eyes itching with the heaviness of sleep. He sat back, rubbing at his eyes with his free hand while the other continued to hold an ink brush. The reports from the border scouts near Qishan were concerning. He'd subtly increased the numbers there over the past month, wanting to keep a closer eye on the Wens now that they didn't have insider information coming from Wen Qing and Wen Ning, and it appeared that it was a good thing he'd done so.

They'd sent word about increased numbers of strangely strong ghouls and fierce corpses roaming the land near the border, something that worried Nie Mingjue. The last he'd heard, Wen Ruohan only had two pieces of Yin Iron, so the fierce corpses shouldn't be too hard to dispatch, but the increased amount still set his instincts raging. Nie Mingjue set his brush down on its holder and got to his feet with a groan. It was late, he knew that much, but as for the exact time, well...

It was dark. That was as far as he knew and really cared to know.

Nie Mingjue stretched the best he could, starting with his arms and legs and then working on his back. He was partially through twisting to ease the strain along his spine when there was a knock on the door. Straightening up, Nie Mingjue quickly sat behind his desk, trying to look attentive and not like he was five minutes away from falling asleep.

“Enter.”

The door slid open, admitting Meng Yao. He carried a tray with a pot of hot and fragrant tea that Nie Mingjue could smell from across the room, as well as a covered bowl and a spoon. He shut the door behind himself before making his way over to Nie Mingjue's desk.

“You missed dinner again.”

Nie Mingjue blinked, surprised, and then realized that yes, his stomach was empty and aching a bit. He cleared a space on his desk for Meng Yao to set the tray on and then gestured for him to take a seat across from him.

“Sit. And... thank you.”

Meng Yao sat once he'd put the tray down, not bothering to show any surprise when Nie Mingjue tested the food and tea for anything strange with a quickly sketched bit of spiritual magic. An incautious leader was a dead leader, especially in times of unrest, so Nie Mingjue had gotten into the habit of testing any and all food and drink he hadn't prepared himself for poisons or other contaminants. He poured himself a cup of tea and cradled it in his hands, the warmth soaking into his stiff fingers.

“You didn't have to bring this, you know.”

Meng Yao smiled, and Nie Mingjue was pleased to see it was one of his true smiles rather than the practiced pleasantries he sometimes used when dealing with people he didn't really like. “Maybe so, but I wanted to nonetheless. And besides, you get more irritable than usual when you haven't eaten for a while. I doubt your paperwork really deserves the brunt of your anger.”

Nie Mingjue let out a tired laugh and then drank some of the tea, savoring the spicy and sweet ginger, cinnamon, and cardamom notes that washed over his tongue. It was one of his favorite blends as the weather turned cooler, especially in the evenings. He set down the cup and then lifted the lid off the bowl, his stomach grumbling at the scent of the beef and barley stew that was contained within.

“Hungry?”

Nie Mingjue shot him a brief look. “Have *you* eaten already?”

“Of course.”

“Hmmp. Get yourself a cup and share my tea with me, then,” Nie Mingjue said. “I doubt I'll be able to finish it all by myself.”

“As you wish, Nie-zongzhu.”

“Bah, none of that. It's too late for good manners.”

Nie Mingjue picked up the spoon and dipped it in the thick stew, blowing a few times on it before lifting it to his mouth and eating the food. He had to force himself to not bolt down the whole bowl, as once his brain realized he was eating, his appetite suddenly roared to life. Meng Yao returned with a clean tea cup from one of the cupboards and poured himself some tea as requested once he'd gone back to his seat across from Nie Mingjue.

“Dare I ask what's kept you up so late?”

Nie Mingjue swallowed his current mouthful of stew and grimaced. “Reports from the border with Qishan. They're... not encouraging.”

“May I see?”

Nie Mingjue weighed the pros and cons of letting Meng Yao see the reports, decided he was too hungry to care, and pushed the papers across the desk. Besides, Meng Yao often had a keen eye for small details that others missed, so it wasn't much of a hardship to let him see. It had taken a while for Nie Mingjue to let Meng Yao be so close to him and see him so unguarded, especially with the memories of the life-that-would-now-never-be, but this Meng Yao...

This Meng Yao was the one he'd seen brief glimpses of in that timeline. This Meng Yao was more open and happy, especially since he still had his mother around and the both of them had safety and stability in their lives, and had for quite some time. Having an actual home where he was respected without question and fiercely protected seemed to have done wonders for Meng Yao, and what echoes of the man who had eventually turned against him remained were ones that seemed only to focus on the well-being of the Nie sect and its two young masters.

Nie Mingjue was so lost in his thoughts of how things had changed that he barely realized he'd finished his stew until the spoon clinked against the porcelain of the bottom of the bowl. He put the bowl and spoon back on the tray, his stomach's protests silenced for the time being, and quietly watched Meng Yao read over the reports. The thought that the faint furrow of the other man's brow was quite fetching caught Nie Mingjue off-guard.

He'd known there had been a sort of magnetic attraction between him and Meng Yao in the previous timeline (not to mention between the two of them and Lan Xichen), but he'd never really acted on it, too focused on getting through the Sunshot Campaign and then, once Meng Yao had defected to play spy and then become Jin Guangyao, trying to retain order in an increasingly disordered world. The attraction had quickly turned to distrust and then hate towards the end, but death...

Death had been strangely clarifying, the hate and distrust falling away from him for the most part, though apparently enough had remained for his corpse to become a fierce one. It hadn't gone away completely when he'd returned to life, but it had faded over the years to a point where he could once more trust Meng Yao. He'd been surprised at how quickly Nie Huaisang had seemed to trust Meng Yao, but perhaps it was because he'd had more time to process the other man's actions in the prior timeline. It still boggled Nie Mingjue's mind to know that his brother had reached sixty-five years of age and then had willingly come back in time to say goodbye to him rather than living out the rest of his life and then joining their ancestors peacefully.

"You're right. This *is* concerning."

Nie Mingjue finished his first cup of tea and then poured a fresh one, waiting to hear what his deputy had to say. He didn't want to rush Meng Yao, especially not over a matter of such importance. He watched Meng Yao shuffle through the pieces of paper a few more times before the other man set them aside and folded his hands in his lap.

"I don't know if there's much to be done beyond what's already been happening," he said. "We can't declare war without a reason, and increased sightings and encounters of fierce corpses and ghouls along the border could be easily explained away by any number of methods. I think the best course of action would be to wait and watch. Besides, winter is fast approaching. I doubt even the Wens would want to risk losing people to the oncoming snows. The more information we have, the better off we'll be to formulate an attack or defense in the future."

Nie Mingjue sighed. That was the conclusion he'd come to, but it frustrated him. He was a man of action, and it rankled to let things sit as they were, especially when he *knew* that the mainline Wens

were planning to go to war. He wasn't sure if they could avoid the Sunshot Campaign entirely, but he would be damned if he wasn't going to try his best to minimize the casualties this time around.

“That's what I thought.” He drank his tea, allowing the flavorful liquid to wallow in his mouth before swallowing. “It helps to have a second eye on things, though.” He tapped the fingers of his free hand against his desk, thinking. “What about that splinter group of the Wens? The one near Dafan Mountain?”

Meng Yao blinked, taken off-guard by the question. “Pardon?”

Nie Mingjue waved a curt hand. “They're... doctors, I think? Do you think they have anything to do with Wen Ruohan and whatever it is he's planning?”

Meng Yao considered the question, sipping at his own cup of tea as he thought. “I doubt it,” he said finally. “I'd have to double-check the records, but they moved there well before Wen Ruohan became leader of their sect. They're distant cousins, if I remember correctly. Two of them are at the Cloud Recesses right now attending lectures with Huaisang and Wuxian.”

“Mm. Huaisang seems to have made quick friends with the younger brother, Wen Qionglin- though apparently he prefers just Wen Ning -according to his messages. No word on if he's made friends with the sister, though,” Nie Mingjue confirmed. The messaging journals had worked out rather well for prototypes, and both Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian had journals that were paired with ones in Nie Mingjue's possession.

“They may be valuable allies in the future, then,” Meng Yao mused, his cup held loosely in one hand. “And if they're truly not with Wen Ruohan, then they likely don't deserve to be painted with the same brush as him if he does decide to move against the other sects.”

Nie Mingjue took a drink of tea, his thoughts tangling around one another like creeping vines. “Perhaps.” He drained his tea and then got to his feet. “I think it'll be best to come at this tomorrow when our minds are fresh and well-rested.”

“Our minds?”

Nie Mingjue shot him a gruffly amused look. “Of course. You're my right hand and one of the best minds in the sect. I value your opinions, especially in complex matters like this.”

Meng Yao set down his cup and stood, a blush stealing over his face. He went to bow to Nie Mingjue in thanks, arms held out in salute, but Nie Mingjue caught him before he could go too low. His cupped hands supported Meng Yao's clasped ones, fingers spread wide so it didn't feel like he was restraining the younger man. Meng Yao looked up at him in surprise. His widening eyes combined with his blush was especially endearing, and Nie Mingjue found his mouth curving upwards and the corners of his eyes crinkling before he could control his expression.

“Didn't I say it was too late for good manners?” he teased, his words light. “Besides, you have no need to bow to me like that just because I told you the truth. Clearly I need to say it more often so you get used to it.”

It was rare to see Meng Yao at a loss for words, but it was clear in that moment he had no idea how to react. Nie Mingjue waited until he straightened up before letting his hands drop, though he found his fingers and palms tingling with residual warmth from the close contact. He picked up the tray Meng Yao had brought in with him, his small smile not fading.

“Come, it's late and we'd best get to bed,” he said. Meng Yao nodded absently, mind still seemingly a thousand miles away, and then went to open the door for Nie Mingjue. They parted ways in the hall once the office was locked and warded, Nie Mingjue dropping the tray off in the kitchens before returning to his own quarters.

As he got ready for bed, Nie Mingjue thought over his last interaction with Meng Yao. The strokes of his brush through his hair slowed and then paused halfway through as he stared sightlessly into the polished bronze mirror set before him. He was aware that his proclivities were odd in that he didn't really feel any sort of physical attraction towards someone unless he knew them very well. He could appreciate the aesthetics of a stranger's face or body without necessarily wanting to take them to his bed, a trait he thought Jin Guangshan would've benefited immensely from.

He drew his brush through his hair one last time and then set it down on the vanity he was sitting in front of before getting up. Meng Yao continued to weigh on his thoughts as Nie Mingjue finished his nightly routine and got into bed. Even with everything he'd done in the prior timeline, Meng Yao had held claim to a special place in Nie Mingjue's heart, and the pains and aches that his betrayals had brought with them had been slowly but surely washed away in the seven years since the time travel had occurred.

Meng Yao seemed far more settled and content with his lot in life than he ever had the first time around, and seeing that had soothed most of the wild and harsh resentment Nie Mingjue had carried for him. Now the younger man held a high spot in Nie Mingjue's regard that was only equaled by Nie Huaisang and Lan Xichen, and Nie Mingjue wasn't sure how to handle it. He wondered if Nie Huaisang would have anything to say about it, and then laughed into the darkness. Here he was, twenty years old again and contemplating asking his younger brother for romantic advice!

Nie Mingjue closed his eyes, an amused smile still lingering on his lips as he fell asleep. Maybe talking with his brother wasn't a bad plan after all. He'd certainly be interested in seeing Nie Huaisang's reaction, even if it was only through the medium of ink and paper.

Wen Qing let out a quiet breath of relief as she stepped back into the safety of the bounds of the Cloud Recesses. Her informants inside Nightless City had told her that Wen Ruohan was slowly but surely declining due to the influence of the Yin Iron and the effects of the supposed 'treatment' she'd left behind for the other doctors to continue in her absence. The acupuncture regimens and medicines did offer some temporary relief, but more importantly that temporary relief was just that, and when the treatments were done in combination over a long period of time, they actually intensified the effects of the resentful energy.

While she'd never actively killed someone in either of her lifetimes so far, the dangers posed by Wen Ruohan were too great to let them progress as they had before. She didn't relish causing pain, but the eventual death of one man versus all those who died before, during, and after the Sunshot Campaign due to the Yin Iron seemed a worthwhile balance. The thought that really it would be the overload of resentful energy that eventually killed Wen Ruohan and not her own hand was a small and cold one, but it helped soothe some of her worries nonetheless.

She nodded to the various disciples, both visiting and otherwise, as she passed through the grounds in search of her brother. As far as anyone knew, Wen Qing had simply gone down to Caiyi Town to pick up some supplies at the shops and markets there and nothing more. She certainly hadn't snuck

away to a clandestine meeting with informants insider the Wen sect who wanted nothing more than to see Wen Ruohan and his son gone, be that dead or otherwise deposed.

The informants had also brought news that the Dafan Mountain Wens had quietly distanced themselves even further from Qishan, leaving their trademark flame-marked robes behind and adopting more mundane colors that would allow them to blend in with the more common folk. Already some had made their names as doctors for the smaller clans and sects, ingratiating themselves with the locals and improving lives.

Wen Qing had kept a close eye on her cousin Wen Shan and his wife, Liu Hong, as they were the eventual parents of A-Yuan. There was still some time before that happened, however, but she wanted them safe nonetheless. They'd settled in an area about five miles away from Lotus Pier where she hoped they would live well, but only time would tell on that one. Wen Ning had told her of what had happened to A-Yuan after the Burial Mounds fell the first time, how Lan Wangji had saved him and raised him as his own. By all accounts, Lan Sizhui had grown into a well-rounded and good young man. Wen Qing could only hope that the same would happen this time around as well.

She pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders in deference to the chill breeze that wound its way through the buildings, a faint frown marring her face. It wasn't that she hated the cold, but it wasn't her favorite, either. At least on this mountain they didn't have to deal with the cold and an ever-pervasive atmosphere of resentful energy.

As she turned the corner, Wen Qing saw a small group of familiar faces not far off. Jiang Yanli, Mianmian, and a few of the other female visiting disciples were clustered in a small group, the varying colors of their cloaks looking like splashes of paint against the stark background of the snowy landscape around them. Jiang Yanli looked over as Wen Qing drew near, a warm smile forming almost immediately.

“Qing-jie, I hope your trip to town went well?”

Wen Qing nodded, managing a small smile of her own. There was something about Jiang Yanli that was immediately warm and soothing, like a hot cup of tea on a cold day, and Wen Qing was powerless to stop it. She was sure half the women here had some sort of crush on Jiang Yanli, be that platonic or otherwise, and it was hard not to given how honestly kind the younger woman was. Wen Qing had never really paid much attention to her in the first timeline beyond knowing that she was important to Wei Wuxian as his *shijie*, but this time around she'd actually gotten to know her and some of the other visiting disciples since she really had no desire to locate the Yin Iron hidden away in the Cold Cave this time around.

“It did, thank you,” she said. She tilted her head a little curiously. “What are you all looking at? I thought you would be somewhere warmer.”

“We were on our way to the women's gathering hall, actually, but-” Mianmian sighed. “Zongyingmei saw this bird and we weren't sure what to do with it. You have good timing. What do you think?”

Wen Qing stepped forward to see what it was the others were looking at. Jia Zongying- of the Ezhou Jia sect, if Wen Qing remembered correctly -was cradling a beautiful blue bird with black markings on its wings and a white underbelly in her hands. One wing was at an odd angle and its feathers were ruffled greatly.

“Oh, I see.” Wen Qing made a show of looking like she was thinking hard and then nodded once. “I think I know just the person. My brother says that Nie-*xiong* is well versed in caring for small birds. I’m better with humans than I am with animals, so I doubt I’d be much use here, unfortunately.”

Jia Zongying brightened considerably at the news that there might be someone who’d be able to help the bird. “That’s wonderful! I wonder where he is.”

Wen Qing laughed. “If we find A-Ning, Wei-*xiong*, Jiang-*xiong*, or even Jin-*xiong*, I’m sure we’ll find Nie-*xiong*,” she said. “Those five tend to stick together rather closely.”

Mianmian grinned. “Good. Jin-*xiong* needs all the friends he can get.”

“Mind your words,” Jiang Yanli chided gently. Mianmian patted her on the arm.

“Don’t worry, Yanli-*jie*, he’s used to me teasing him. Besides, I’m happy for him. He and Nie-*xiong* have been exchanging letters ever since Nie-*zongzhu* came to power, but letters aren’t exactly a replacement for talking in person, and Jin-*xiong* needs all the help he can get with talking to people who aren’t in our sect, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

Jiang Yanli sighed, walking alongside Mianmian as they went to hunt down Nie Huaisang and the others. “He is... Well. I think he does better when he has time to prepare what he has to say. I can only hope that he can relax more once we’re married.”

“Or before,” Wen Qing said dryly, earning some polite laughter from the others. It was strange, being in such a friendly group, but she found she quite liked it. It reminded her of the better times in the Burial Mounds, oddly enough, with all of her family gathered around the fire and eating together. She soaked in the warmth and camaraderie, surprised to find she liked having friends she could rely on outside of those related to her by blood or dire circumstance.

They found all five of the young men they’d been looking for in a pavilion that had a large brazier in the center that helped to drive away the sharp chill in the air, sitting around and talking companionably to one another. Much to her surprise, Lan Wangji was there as well, presumably to keep an eye on the group, though judging from the way he was watching Wei Wuxian, it may have been more than just mere supervision.

“Nie-*xiong*! May we borrow a moment of your time?”

Nie Huaisang looked up from the painting he’d been showing Wen Ning (Wen Qing couldn’t help but notice how closely they were sitting. How... *curious*), surprise flashing across his face at the sight of the small group of ladies.

“Of course, Luo-*guniang*,” he replied to Mianmian’s call. He got to his feet, one hand resting briefly on Wen Ning’s shoulder to steady himself, and then hurried over, sketching a quick bow once he arrived. “Why don’t you all come into the warmth? The pavilion is more than large enough for all of us.”

Wen Qing glanced over at Lan Wangji, who nodded briefly in approval, and then stepped into the pavilion once Nie Huaisang had moved out of the way. While men and women were usually separated during the night, during the day there was a more relaxed rule on how they could interact with one another, and out in public in such large numbers was perfectly fine. The girls arranged

themselves on the opposite side of the brazier from the boys, Jia Zongying taking a seat closest to the warmth so the tiny bird in her hands wouldn't get too cold.

"Now, how can I help all of you?" Nie Huaisang asked, tucking his hands into his sleeves.

"We found this bird on one of the paths," Jia Zongying explained, holding it up. "It looks like its wing may be broken."

That caught the attention of the other boys, even Jin Zixuan, who'd been all but enraptured in a book he'd been reading. They came over to look from a polite distance as Nie Huaisang sat down across from Jia Zongying and then carefully took the bird from her.

"Oh, look at it!" Wei Wuxian said. "It's so tiny!" He rested an elbow on Jiang Cheng's shoulder. Jiang Cheng huffed and pushed at the offending limb.

"I'm not an armrest."

"Aw, but Jiang-*xiong*, you're the perfect height for one!"

"Why you-!"

"Not now, you two," Nie Huaisang said absently. "Go fight on the training grounds if you have to. Wen Ning, I need your help."

Wen Qing watched her brother kneel next to Nie Huaisang, one eyebrow rising at the sight of the faint blush forming on Wen Ning's face as Nie Huaisang transferred the bird to his waiting hands. Wen Ning's eyes were wide as he looked down at the bird.

"O-oh! It's so *small*."

"And since it's so small, we'll have to be extra careful, and you have some of the steadiest hands here." Nie Huaisang paused. "No offense meant, Wen-*guniang*."

"None taken," Wen Qing said. "My brother's hands are very steady. It's why he's such a good archer."

"You shoot? Hey, Wen Ning, you'll have to show us your skills when the weather turns better," Wei Wuxian announced, even as Wen Ning's blush deepened. "Maybe you can give Huaisang some pointers."

"Wei Wuxian, shut up," Nie Huaisang said calmly, "or I'll tell *da-ge* you're bullying me."

"Ha, like you'd do that. He'd agree with me and you know it," Wei Wuxian shot back.

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes and then looked back down at the bird. He placed one finger on its rapidly fluttering breast and sent a small bit of spiritual energy through it, trying to ascertain the extent of its injuries. The bird chirped weakly but didn't try to move, not wanting to injure itself any further than it already had. Wen Qing approved of its good sense. Unlike *some* of her patients (she had to stop herself from glaring at Wei Wuxian, who had yet to fall under her care in this timeline), the bird clearly knew that moving too much while it was hurt was a bad thing.

"I think the wing is just sprained, not broken," he announced, stroking his finger along the bird's feathers in an attempt to calm it. "It just needs some warmth, rest, and food."

“What does it eat?”

Nie Huaisang looked up at Lan Wangji, who had moved closer to observe the bird as well. This put him rather close to Wei Wuxian, but the latter didn't seem to mind.

“Insects, so whatever can be found right now under logs and leaves and so on,” Nie Huaisang said after looking at the bird's beak. “It probably won't need to be under our care for more than a day or two. The sprain didn't seem that bad.”

“That's good,” Jiang Yanli said. “Would you mind caring for it since you know the most about birds, Nie-*xiong*?”

“It cannot be a pet,” Lan Wangji warned.

“Don't worry, I don't plan on keeping it as one,” Nie Huaisang assured him. “This little one will be released when it's ready to fly again.”

“Mn. I will get a cage for it.”

Lan Wangji swept off, his white robes looking especially ethereal against the snowy grounds. Wen Qing saw Wei Wuxian follow him visually until he was out of sight before his cheeks colored faintly and his attention returned to the bird. Wen Qing fought the urge to roll her eyes. Gods, what a pair of idiots. She'd forgotten how ridiculous they were at this time in their lives. Not that they were much better as adults, but still.

The Second Jade of Lan returned a few minutes later with a small wicker cage that looked like it was meant more for holding rabbits than birds, but it would do the job nonetheless. Once the bird was placed inside the cage, Wei Wuxian offered to go hunting for insects for it, Jiang Cheng following after him with a grumbled, “Well, *someone* might as well keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn't fall off a cliff.”

Nie Huaisang made a strangled noise at that, drawing the attention of several of the others.

“Are you alright, Nie-*xiong*?” Jin Zixuan asked.

“Fine! I'm fine!” Nie Huaisang said quickly as he stood. “Honestly, I am. Just- Oh, don't mind me. Let's get this little one inside where it can be properly warm. When the others come back, can you tell them I took it to my room?”

Wen Qing watched as Nie Huaisang and her brother walked off with the bird, Lan Wangji eventually going in search of Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian while Jin Zixuan lingered momentarily.

“Ah. Um...” He bowed to the girls, his face a study in indecision as he straightened up. “I'm glad we- er, Nie-*xiong* could help you with the bird. Thank you for bringing it to us.”

Jiang Yanli nodded, a faintly amused smile softening her mouth. “You are more than welcome. We're just glad that it could be helped.”

Mianmian looked between the two, and then, in a swift motion, linked her and Wen Qing's arms together. “Why don't we go for a walk and make sure there aren't any other birds, Wen-*jie*? Jin-*xiong*, would you be willing to accompany Jiang-*jie* and us as we walk?”

Jin Zixuan froze like a rabbit for a brief moment, the rapid calculation almost visible behind his eyes. On the one hand, it would provide a socially acceptable way for him to talk to Jiang Yanli for a period of time, but on the other, it meant he had to *talk with* her and not *at* her. That could prove more of a struggle, even with their greater familiarity due to the letters they'd exchanged over the years.

"I would be honored," he said eventually. Wen Qing could almost feel the way Jiang Yanli perked up at that and mentally sighed. It was a good thing the two were actually such a well-made match, even if it didn't seem like it right then.

Their small group set off along the nearest path after saying their goodbyes to the rest of the group, Wen Qing and Mianmian a few paces behind Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli. Playing chaperone wasn't exactly what she'd expected to do with her day, but Wen Qing figured that helping along a budding romance was decidedly more worth her time than hunting the Yin Iron, and more profitable in the long run as well.

"So," she murmured as they walked, "a walk?"

Mianmian nodded. "A walk. And then..." She grinned sheepishly. "Well, at least they're talking?"

Wen Qing watched the two ahead of them converse in a slightly stilted manner, one eyebrow arching. "If you say so."

Winter melted slowly into spring, and with it came the freeing of water in the rivers and lakes around Gusu. Wen Ning found himself spending more and more time with the other boys, a direct contrast to the last time he'd been at the Cloud Recesses. As promised, he showed off his archery to the others, his form needing very little correcting due to his experiences from his past life. Wei Wuxian was quite pleased regardless, especially when it turned out that Nie Huaisang picked up a few pointers from Wen Ning.

There had been a few times where Wen Ning had had to correct Nie Huaisang's posture or stance, but he'd done his best to not make the situation more awkward than it already was. Neither of them escaped those sessions without some gentle teasing courtesy of Wei Wuxian, who was still quite shameless in this lifetime, and warm cheeks. It didn't help that even with their older minds and golden cores, their bodies were still those of teenagers and responded accordingly. Going through puberty twice was a bitch plain and simple.

Wen Ning knew he liked Nie Huaisang, that wasn't the issue. The issue was wanting to *do* something about it before it was safe to do so. There was so much to do and take care of before he could even start thinking about romance, but his traitorous body and brain didn't seem to want to catch on to that. He found his thoughts drifting in Nie Huaisang's direction almost constantly, and it wasn't just about the elegant man he knew his friend would grow into, either.

Little things reminded Wen Ning of Nie Huaisang, be that cute little songbirds, a particular scent, or even just the color of a tapestry or painting. He'd never really had the chance for romance before, as the war and then becoming a fierce corpse had put a permanent damper on that sort of exploration in his first go-around, but this time... Well, this time, his mind seemed focused on nothing else, and it was starting to get annoying.

He couldn't even tell anyone about it, though he suspected his sister knew that he harbored some kind of feelings toward Nie Huaisang. Wen Ning sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face, trying to focus his thoughts on something other than his feelings toward his friend.

“Everything okay?”

Wen Ning looked up to see Jiang Cheng standing on the path nearby. “Huh? Oh, yes, I'm fine. Just... thinking about the future.”

Jiang Cheng nodded, his hands clasped behind his back. Wen Ning hesitated before gesturing at the open seat next to him on the bench.

“Feel free to sit if you want,” he offered. Jiang Cheng's eyebrows rose in concert for a moment, his surprise getting the better of him.

“You're okay with that?”

Wen Ning shrugged. “I wouldn't have offered if I wasn't.”

Jiang Cheng huffed quietly before taking the seat, folding his hands in his lap. “The future, huh? What about it?”

“Ah, just... What'll happen after we leave here, I suppose. My sister and I will be returning home soon, though...” He rubbed at the back of his neck.

“Though?”

“I don't know if I really want to go back to Nightless City,” Wen Ning admitted. “Wen-zongzhu has been very kind in letting us stay there, but he's been getting more-”

“Wen Ning! Jiang Cheng!”

Wen Ning broke off, startled at the sudden shout breaking the calm late morning air. Wei Wuxian came running up to them, Nie Huaisang not far behind.

“Wei Wuxian? What're you yelling about?” Jiang Cheng snapped. “You know the rules! You're going to get us all in trouble. *Again.*”

Wei Wuxian waved away his concern. “Forget the *rules*,” he said. “There're water ghouls in Caiyi Town, and Zewu-Jun is bringing some of us down there to help out! You two should come with us.”

“Water ghouls?” Jiang Cheng's annoyance faded into confusion, his brow furrowing. “That's weird. Why would there be water ghouls here? I'd expect Caiyi Town to have strong swimmers.”

“No one knows,” Wei Wuxian said in far too bright a tone in Wen Ning's opinion. “That's why we're going to go look. Come on, it'll be fun!”

As Wei Wuxian dragged Jiang Cheng up off the bench and then down the path toward the entrance gate, Wen Ning and Nie Huaisang exchanged heavy looks. Water ghouls in Caiyi Town meant the Waterborne Abyss, which meant only one thing:

The war had begun.

Below is the bird in question, a [Siberian Blue Robin](#):



Tomorrow We Fight

Chapter Notes

The poem partially contained within this chapter is "Grass" by Bai Juyi, a Chinese poet and government official from the Tang Dynasty. Minor warnings for non-graphic mentions of nightmares. Also, any recognizable dialogue is (C) The Untamed and its writers. Also, my love for a certain scene in *Fatal Journey* shows strongly in this chapter. Sorry/not sorry

Nie Huaisang stayed by Wen Ning's side as they hurried after Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian, Wen Qing catching up with them with her sheathed sword in hand a little ways before the entrance gate. Lan Xichen barely blinked when he saw the larger than expected group, merely nodding in easy acquiescence before leading the way down the mountain and to Caiyi Town. Since they weren't sure how long it would take, they got enough rooms at one of the larger inns there, Lan Xichen paying ahead of time before leading the way out of town and then to Biling Lake.

It was a simple matter to rent the boats and soon they were off, talismans affixed to the front of each vessel to propel them forward. Nie Huaisang shivered as an eerie fog enveloped their party. He'd only heard about the experience second-hand from Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian, and that hadn't prepared him for how unsettling everything was. He was riding in the same boat as the Wen siblings, his grip on his scabbard tight.

"This isn't ominous at *all*," he grumbled. Wen Ning laughed quietly.

"It is rather dramatic," he agreed, "but fitting given what we're here for."

"If you say so."

As they reached close to the center of the lake, the boats slowed, and Lan Xichen spoke, his voice carrying oddly through the fog.

"Everyone, be careful. We're near the haunted area."

Nie Huaisang exchanged glances with the other two in his boat and then shifted his grip on his sword, one hand on the scabbard and the other on Yaotou's hilt to allow him to draw it easily. They followed suit just as Wei Wuxian sent a shout and a spray of water toward Lan Wangji's boat, causing the other boy to leap over to join him as the boat capsized, revealing a water ghoulish that looked like a tangle of far-too mobile lake grass.

Things moved quickly after that, the water ghouls directing them toward the center of the lake where the fog was the thickest and the water a deep and unsettling brackish green. A cry of pain from Jiang Cheng saw Wen Qing leaving the boat and soaring through the air to go check on him. Wen Ning sighed and then rubbed his temple with his free hand.

"Are you alright?" Nie Huaisang asked softly.

Wen Ning shrugged. "I'm fine," he replied just as quietly. "The... The echoes of the resentful energy from the water ghouls are..." He shivered, fingers flexing around his scabbard. "...intense. I wasn't expecting that. It wasn't as bad last time."

Nie Huaisang reached out a hand and placed it on Wen Ning's shoulder, squeezing gently. "Just let me know if you need any help, okay?"

Wen Ning nodded and then startled at the sudden sound of loud splashing and a boat creaking dangerously. The two of them drew their swords, Nie Huaisang turning so his back was against Wen Ning's.

"What's going on?" he called out.

"The color of the water- look at how dark it is!" Wen Ning added.

Their boat rocked as something bumped into it from below, water splashing over the sides.

"A Waterborne Abyss! The water ghouls came together and formed a Waterborne Abyss!" Wei Wuxian exclaimed. That announcement earned considerable consternation from the other disciples, and a wave of panic swept over the group until Lan Wangji gave out the order to take to the sky on their swords. Nie Huaisang and Wen Ning followed the order, leaping high into the air and then channeling their spiritual energy through their swords in order to maneuver them under their feet.

A brief break in the fog allowed them to see Su She still on his boat, his sword nowhere in sight. Wen Ning groaned.

"Why is he such an idiot?" he muttered before directing his sword downward. Nie Huaisang followed him as backup, not wanting to see any harm come to his friend. He didn't particularly care about Su She, to be honest, but if Wen Ning thought he should be saved, then so be it. Maybe they'd be able to keep Su She from being more of an idiot, especially if they kept him away from the Jin Sect.

Or maybe, Nie Huaisang quickly revised, Su She would still be an idiot regardless of what they did to help him, because he struggled against Wen Ning's grasp when the other cultivator took hold of his collar.

"Stay still!" Nie Huaisang snapped. "He's helping you!"

"My sword!" Su She kept trying to summon his sword to him even as Wen Ning started to lift skyward once more. Wen Ning's sword wobbled dangerously as they went up, making Nie Huaisang swear sharply.

"Forget the sword. You can get a new one; you can't get a new life! A-Ying! I need your help over here!"

It was a mark of how panicked he was that Nie Huaisang forewent Wei Wuxian's courtesy name in any form, but he hardly cared. He focused instead on supporting Wen Ning, jamming his hands under his friend's armpits in a desperate attempt to keep him from falling into the tumultuous water below. He barely registered Wei Wuxian coming up and grabbing hold of Su She, and just in time, too, as Wen Ning's whole body went limp.

Nie Huaisang only just managed to get Wen Ning onto Yaotou, extending a thin lash of spiritual energy to snag Wen Ning's sword before it fell. Thankfully, the sword didn't seem to mind him controlling it for the short span of time it took to direct it back into its scabbard, the blade sliding home with a quiet *snick* of metal against lacquer. Nie Huaisang panted as he slowly but surely rose into the air, his arms wrapped around Wen Ning's waist, one hand holding onto the scabbard of Wen Ning's sword since its owner was thoroughly out of it and not able to keep hold of it himself.

He focused on keeping the two of them safe, ignoring Lan Xichen's eventually successful efforts to quell and then seal the Waterborne Abyss. Nie Huaisang looked up when Wen Qing soared over, her worry clear for anyone to see as she looked her brother over. Wen Ning's head lolled back against Nie Huaisang's shoulder, and for once the latter cursed his height. He wasn't horribly short, but Wen Ning still had a good four inches on him, so the whole matter was rather awkward. Nie Huaisang hardly cared, though. What mattered was that Wen Ning was safe.

Wen Qing helped shoulder some of the burden of her brother's weight as they made their way back to the docks, the boats they'd rented all either smashed or half-sunken in the lake. The trek back to Caiyi Town wasn't all that long, thankfully, and soon they had Wen Ning safe and sound in one of the rooms to rest and recuperate.

Nie Huaisang stayed in the room with Wen Ning while Wen Qing went to the local apothecary to get some of the more specialized herbs she would need to help him recover. Nie Huaisang dragged one of the low stools over from the small table in the corner of the room, setting it up by the bed and then sinking down on it after casting a quick comfort charm since he planned on being there for a while. Wen Ning was far too still for his liking. Hell, even as a fierce corpse Wen Ning still had some sort of vitality and motion about him, even if it was somewhat stiff.

He set Wen Ning's sword against the wall, giving the scabbard a few absent pats. "Thank you for letting me save you," he murmured to it, letting his fingers trace over the hilt before removing his hand. Nie Huaisang knew it was silly, but he swore he felt a faint thrum of approving energy just before his fingertips lifted away.

Nie Huaisang rummaged around in his *qiankun* sleeve, drew out a book of poetry he kept in there, and then began to read, hoping his words would bring Wen Ning some comfort as he recovered.

Awareness returned slowly to Wen Ning, the heart-wrenching screams and beguiling whispers that had blasted through his mind the moment he got close to the surface-dwelling heart of the Waterborne Abyss fading as reality reasserted itself. He felt warm and comfortable, the faint bite of bitter herbs on the back of his tongue speaking of the medicine only his sister knew how to make. His limbs felt leaden, their weight heavy and dragging at his muscles and bones.

The soreness would last for several days if it followed the same pattern as the previous timeline, something he wasn't looking forward to. The sound of someone reading poetry in a voice that, while mostly steady, was occasionally scratchy and rough with exhaustion, was a new experience, however, and it took a moment for Wen Ning to realize it was Nie Huaisang and that he was relatively close by.

"Wild grasses spread o'er ancient plain; / With spring and fall they come and go. / Even fire can't burn them up; again / they rise when vernal breezes blow," Nie Huaisang murmured, and then sighed softly.

Wen Ning heard the rustle of fabric before his hand was picked up and held carefully, a thumb slowly sweeping over the back of his hand.

“You'd best wake up soon, alright? If- If he wasn't already gone, I would've found a way to go back and give We- the Yiling Patriarch a piece of my mind for not telling me about this. He just said you'd reacted badly and left it at that. Typical of him to focus more on the action than the consequences at that age.”

The bitter bite in Nie Huaisang's voice was tempered with a melancholy sadness that Wen Ning knew all too well. He felt the bed shift, the angle at which Nie Huaisang was holding his hand dipping until their joined hands were resting on the blankets.

“I just... I want you to be okay, alright? I can't... I don't want to lose you.”

Wen Ning heard Nie Huaisang sigh once more before he went quiet. The weight of what Wen Ning could only assume was his friend's head settled against their hands, and not long after the sound of steady breathing betrayed Nie Huaisang's descent into sleep. Wen Ning let himself relax as well, falling back into a cleansing and restorative sleep of his own, his mind no longer plagued with worry and the screams of the damned.

That peace was broken some time later by the sound of muffled cries that soon resolved themselves into heart-breaking shouts.

“*Da-ge!* No, don't- I can't- can't- *please, da-ge, don't go!*”

Wen Ning jolted awake, the dimness of the room making him unsure if he'd actually managed to open his eyes. He got over it quickly, though, when Nie Huaisang let out another shout, though this one was of wordless grief and agony. Wen Ning focused intently on him, his heart dropping into the pit of his stomach when he saw the tears streaking down Nie Huaisang's face. He hated to do it, but he wasn't about to let his friend suffer through any more of his nightmare if he could manage it.

“Nie Huaisang!” Wen Ning called, pitching his voice so that it carried clearly to Nie Huaisang but little further. “Nie Huaisang, wake up! *Huaisang!*”

Nie Huaisang stayed locked in his dreams for long enough for Wei Wuxian to come stumbling bleary-eyed into the room, having been sleeping in the one across the way. Wen Ning gave him a helpless look, cursing his own weakness and inability to do anything at the moment. Wei Wuxian hurried over and scooped Nie Huaisang into his arms.

“Move over to one side if you can,” he said. Wen Ning followed the order without thinking, glad for the size of the bed. Wei Wuxian laid Nie Huaisang down next to him and then curled up behind him, his front against his brother's back. Wen Ning turned on his side to give them more room, as even with the bed's larger size, the three of them barely fit on it as it was. He watched Wei Wuxian stroke his fingers through Nie Huaisang's hair, the repetitive and gentle motions starting to soothe the nightmare-ridden young man.

Nie Huaisang snuffled a few times, his tense posture slowly relaxing as he stirred. He opened his eyes, blinking away the remaining tears with a puzzled expression.

“Wh-” He turned his head and looked back at Wei Wuxian, who merely smiled lopsidedly at him.
“Oh. Another nightmare?”

“Yeah. Everything that happened yesterday probably didn't help.”

Wei Wuxian brushed the tears off of Nie Huaisang's cheeks before letting his hand fall. If Wen Ning didn't know the two of them like he did, it would've seemed like he was intruding on something romantic, but as it was, it warmed his heart to see how close and caring they were with one another.

Nie Huaisang let out a long, slow breath and then turned to look at Wen Ning. “Uh... Sorry about-”

Wen Ning reached out and placed a hand lightly over Nie Huaisang's mouth. He might not be a Lan with a silencing spell at the ready, but he could still stop the words before they emerged if needed.

“No need. Everyone gets nightmares. I'm not going to accept any apologies for you being human.”

Nie Huaisang choked out a laugh as Wen Ning moved his hand away. “That's the nicest way anyone's told me to shut up.”

Wen Ning couldn't help but smile at that, glad for the dimness of the room that hid his warm cheeks. “Yes, well, if you want I can get *jiejie* in here to be rude.”

“No, I'm good!”

“Good. Do... Do you want to talk about it?”

Nie Huaisang shook his head. “I... worry. About *da-ge*,” he said, choosing his words carefully.
“About what could happen to him.”

It took a moment for Wen Ning to realize what Nie Huaisang meant by that, and then it hit him like a punch to the gut. He felt especially idiotic. Sure, Nie Mingjue's *qi* deviation and subsequent death had taken place after Wen Ning's imprisonment in Koi Tower, but he'd been more than filled in on what had happened over the years.

“Oh. Right. Um... Think you can go back to sleep after that?”

“I can try.”

The next morning, Wen Qing found the three of them tangled up on the bed, one of Wei Wuxian's legs dangling off the side while Wen Ning had managed to somehow brace himself near the other edge. Nie Huaisang was sandwiched safely between them, his face tucked against the crook of Wen Ning's neck and one hand loosely grasping Wei Wuxian's arm. Wen Ning nearly fell off the bed when his sister woke him, his sleep-fogged brain not quite up to speed.

“Come on, time to get up,” Wen Qing said, “all three of you. Lan-*xiong* says we're going to be leaving soon. We'll be taking boats around Caiyi Town to make sure that none of the water ghouls came up the canals... And maybe do a bit of shopping.”

Wen Ning carefully disentangled himself from the others, his heart fluttering at the adorably grumpy noise Nie Huaisang made as he moved. Wen Qing checked him over once he got to his feet, holding her brother's wrist and sending a querying tendril of spiritual energy through his meridians to make sure he'd recovered overnight.

“Hm. You're still a little low on energy, but that can be fixed with some proper food and more rest,” she announced as Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang pulled themselves out of the bed. The two of them left for their own room to go get freshened up, leaving the Wen siblings alone.

“I'll get some fruit in the market,” Wen Ning promised. “And maybe some meat buns.”

“Good. You want to explain what all that was about?” Wen Qing gestured at the rumpled bed.

“Nie Huaisang... He fell asleep in here last night,” Wen Ning said, keeping his voice quiet. “He woke me up having nightmares, and then Wei Wuxian came in to calm him down. We talked for a bit after Nie Huaisang woke up before we all went back to sleep.” He rubbed the back of his neck with a laugh. “I'm surprised none of us fell off in the night, to be honest.”

Wen Qing cast a refreshing spell on him, his clothes losing their wrinkles and gaining the faint scent of sun-warmed fabric mixed with cinnamon. It was a scent he'd always associated with her, even in their time in the Burial Mounds, and it never failed to make him feel happy and well-loved.

“Speaking of... I found him in here reading poetry out loud before I went to bed,” Wen Qing said. “I didn't want to bother him since he wasn't doing any harm.”

“Ah. I could hear him reading a bit,” Wen Ning admitted. “It was... nice.”

He said nothing about what Nie Huaisang had said after he'd finished reading the poetry, not wanting to break the trust that had been placed in him, even if Nie Huaisang hadn't been aware he'd been awake. Perhaps especially then, since it had been said in such strict, if unknowing, confidence. Wen Qing shot him an amused smile.

“I'm sure it was.”

Wen Ning huffed at her teasing tone as he grabbed his sword. “I don't want to hear it.”

“I didn't say a thing.”

“No, but you were *thinking* it.”

The two of them left the room once they were ready, joining the others down in the dining room for breakfast. Nie Huaisang shot them a smile as they joined him at his table. Wei Wuxian had already eaten and was sitting at Lan Wangji's table, trying to draw his crush into a conversation that consisted of more than short sentences or one word replies. Lan Wangji appeared more focused on his tea than the conversation, but he also wasn't snapping at Wei Wuxian to go away, either, so that was a good sign.

“Morning,” Nie Huaisang said as they sat down. “Tea?”

“Thank you.”

The waiter brought two clean cups and a fresh pot of tea over to the table after Nie Huaisang flagged him down. Nie Huaisang waited until they were left alone before placing a subtle talisman on the table where it was mostly hidden from view. The noise from the rest of the room diminished greatly, leaving a muted hum in its wake.

“Privacy talisman,” Nie Huaisang explained. “It'll keep most people from eavesdropping on us. So... Should we expect anything to happen during the boat trip?”

Wen Ning shook his head. "Except for Wei-*gongzi* flirting with Lan-*xiong* via loquats, not really," he said. "It's just a nice boat ride through the canal market."

Nie Huaisang relaxed before picking up his cup of tea. "Wonderful. It'll be nice to go through the market in such a lazy fashion."

"You just hate walking," Wen Ning teased. Nie Huaisang grinned.

"I don't mind walking, but I also don't mind *not* walking, either. A lazy boat ride in the height of spring? Yes, *please*."

Nie Huaisang spent the evening after they returned from Caiyi Town in a courtyard near the entrance to the women's quarters with the Wen siblings, enjoying the steamed spiced meat and vegetable buns that they'd purchased at the market. It was a nice break from the bland fare served at the dining hall, and the weather was pleasant enough that the three of them stayed where they were until the warning bell chimed that signaled five minutes until curfew.

Wen Qing rose to her feet, her hands smoothing over the rich fabric of her clothing. "We'd best get to bed. I trust you two won't have any problems getting back to your own rooms?"

"Of course not, *jiejie*," Wen Ning assured her as he and Nie Huaisang got up as well. Wen Ning hugged his sister, making Nie Huaisang smile. He bowed politely to her and then wished her good night. Wen Qing returned the farewell with a small smile, something that warmed Nie Huaisang. He knew she rarely gave people outside of her brother and close circle of friends smiles, so he felt both pleased and honored that she regarded him so well.

He and Wen Ning made their way back to the latter's quarters, Nie Huaisang lingering in the doorway in his reluctance to leave his friend. Wen Ning shook his head in amusement.

"Come on in. There's no need to hover in the door like an indecisive cat."

Nie Huaisang laughed and then stepped into the room, sliding the door shut behind him. He cast a privacy ward in an almost absent motion, not wanting to draw the attention of any of the patrols should they get too loud or spend too long talking. He took a seat at the small table in the corner of the room as Wen Ning stepped behind a privacy screen to get undressed and then ready for bed.

"The market was nice," Wen Ning said amid the rustle of fabric. Nie Huaisang hummed in reply.

"It was," he agreed. "The peace is nice, but..."

"But it's temporary."

"Yeah." Nie Huaisang ran a hand over his face. "Even with all the paths we've diverted, it still doesn't feel like we've changed enough. The war's still coming, and I doubt it'll be able to be stopped before it starts even if Wen Ruohan somehow dies soon."

"Unfortunately, I don't think he will be, even with the 'treatment' he's been getting."

Wen Ning's voice was muffled briefly by his shirt before he stepped out around the privacy screen wearing just a simple shirt and pants in a lightweight linen. His hair was loose and his comb was in

hand as he went over to his bed and sat on its edge. Nie Huaisang watched him run the comb through his hair, frowning at the stiff way Wen Ning was moving.

“Still sore?”

Wen Ning nodded, a wry smile curving his mouth. “Yeah. I should be alright in a few days by the lantern lighting ceremony. My core is stronger than it was the first time around, but it'll never be as strong as someone like Wei Wuxian. I can still fly and fight if needed, so I'm happy with it. I just recover a little more slowly than most.”

“Do you want any help with your hair?”

The offer was out of Nie Huaisang's mouth before he could think about it. His teeth clicked together as he quickly shut up, his cheeks warming. Wen Ning blinked a few times, taken off-guard by the offer, and then, much to Nie Huaisang's amazement, held out the comb with a faint blush of his own.

“Only if you want.”

Nie Huaisang drew in a quiet breath as he got to his feet and took the comb. It was made from finely worked sandalwood, and had a carving of a ginkgo tree leaf along the body above the tines. He knelt behind Wen Ning after taking off his boots so he didn't make a mess of the blankets, hesitating only momentarily before beginning to draw the comb through Wen Ning's hair. Nie Huaisang was careful to not pull or let the comb snag, removing the few tangles he found with his fingers before moving the comb through the affected area.

When he was done combing, Nie Huaisang started braiding Wen Ning's hair for sleep. It was very tempting to put in a Nie-style braid within the larger one, but he resisted. He cared deeply for Wen Ning, far more than he ever thought he'd care for anyone besides his brothers, and wanted to do right by him. Wen Ning's fifteenth birthday had passed a few weeks ago, and his own sixteenth was coming up in about three, so they were of ages to begin thinking about courting, even if it would be a longer one given the upcoming war.

Nie Huaisang finished the braid, tying it off with a piece of soft cloth Wen Ning handed over to him. He let his hands drop into his lap, already missing the gentle intimacy of the past few minutes. When he trusted that his voice wouldn't betray his feelings, he spoke, his fingers curling around the smooth wood of the comb.

“There we go. All done.”

“Thank you.”

Wen Ning's words were as quiet as his own. It was clear neither of them wanted to break the peaceful atmosphere that had gathered around them. Nie Huaisang got off the bed, his free hand resting momentarily on Wen Ning's shoulder for balance. The comb was set safely on a nearby table for later retrieval by its owner.

“I, uh, I should probably go,” Nie Huaisang said, glancing at the door. Wen Ning got up, looking as hesitant as Nie Huaisang felt.

“Do you think you can get back to your room without the patrols catching you?”

Nie Huaisang knew he should say yes- his own room wasn't all that far away -but suddenly the distance felt insurmountable. He hummed, fiddling idly with the edge of a sleeve.

“You know, my memory of the patrols has faded over the years,” he said finally, earning an amused grin from Wen Ning. “I’m not sure I’d be able to make it back safely.”

“Good thing I’ve got extra blankets and pillows, then,” Wen Ning said. He glanced at the bed. “I, uh, I don’t think the bed is big enough for both of us, though.”

“Don’t worry about it. One night on the floor isn’t going to kill me. I’ve slept in weirder and far more uncomfortable places, and often without the comfort of pillows and blankets.”

Wen Ning laughed as he fetched the blankets and pillow for Nie Huaisang, and soon the latter was set up for the night. They talked for a while longer until Nie Huaisang found himself nodding off. He’d pay for it in the morning with a sore back and questions from Wei Wuxian, he was sure of it, but at the moment, he didn’t care one bit.

The next morning, Nie Huaisang arrived to his and Wei Wuxian’s room just after five, intending on getting washed up and dressed in fresh clothing. He opened the doors to find the remains of peanuts and broken pottery on the floor, and the smell of Emperor’s Smile lingering in the air, but no Wei Wuxian. A groan left him. Fuck. Right. He’d been so caught up with spending that golden time with Wen Ning that he’d forgotten...

Well. The war was truly off to a start, then, even if no one had declared it. The piece of the Yin Iron held in the Cloud Recesses would be found within the next few days and then... And then their time at Cloud Recesses would be over and they’d have to leave the protection of its wards and walls and go back to the real world.

Nie Huaisang went through with his morning ablutions after shutting the doors behind him, pausing long enough after getting dressed to clean up the mess with a few well-placed spells and sending off a quick note to Nie Mingjue via the message journal before he went off in search of Wei Wuxian. He was just in time to see the final few blows land on his brother’s back. Nie Huaisang hid the lower half of his face with Dafeng when he saw that Jin Zixuan had replaced him in the group of trouble-makers. Well. *That* was a surprise.

He waited until the punishment was over and then stepped forward, bowing politely to those who had carried it out before turning to Wei Wuxian.

“Do I even want to know?”

Wei Wuxian’s response was more a grimace than a true smile, though he did his best to fake it. “Ah, you know me,” he said as he slowly got to his feet. “Trouble always finds me.”

“And then you drag others into it,” Jiang Cheng muttered with a roll of his eyes. Nie Huaisang stepped forward and helped Jin Zixuan to his feet. He doubted the other heir had been punished like that a day in his life, and the shaken look Jin Zixuan had proved that.

“You two, I can understand, but Jin-xiong?” Nie Huaisang continued on, giving Jin Zixuan an absent nod when the other thanked him for his help.

“We were just...” Wei Wuxian paused as Lan Wangji strode past, his posture stiff as a board, and only continued on when it was just the four of them. “...well. Since we're going home soon, we thought it would be nice to have a relaxing night.”

“Uh huh. And then what happened?”

“Well...”

Jin Zixuan sighed. “We got too loud and Lan Wangji heard us as he was doing a patrol. Jiang Cheng and I managed to get back to our rooms, but Wei Wuxian-”

“Ah, surely we don't need to keep going?” Wei Wuxian interrupted as the four of them started walking through the grounds, albeit at a slow pace in deference to the sore backs of three of them. “We've all learned our lesson, don't worry.”

“He tricked Lan Wangji into drinking,” Jiang Cheng finished. “Which was a dumb thing to do, you idiot.”

Nie Huaisang lightly tapped Wei Wuxian on the shoulder with his closed fan. “I'm going to have to tell *da-ge*, you know. That is, if Xichen-*ge* doesn't tell him first.”

“You really don't!”

Nie Huaisang shot him a look. “Try telling *da-ge* that. We're lucky it's so close to the end of the time here. They're not going to throw you out because of this, I don't think. They would've done more than just that light beating if they were.” He sighed heavily. “I- Oh! Xichen-*ge*! We were just talking about you!”

The four of them stopped as Lan Xichen approached them, his ever-present smile deepening. Nie Huaisang stayed quiet as the older man told them about the Cold Springs, and then nudged Wei Wuxian when he seemed hesitant about going.

“Thank you for your suggestion, Xichen-*ge*,” he said, giving Lan Xichen a small bow. “I'm sure my brother will avail himself of their use.”

“What?”

Nie Huaisang nudged Wei Wuxian again. “It's a kind offer, Wei Wuxian. Go. Unless you want to still be sore on the ride back home?”

Wei Wuxian shook his head. “No, thank you.”

He split off from the group, heading in the direction Lan Xichen had said the Cold Springs were.

“I think I'm just going to take a hot bath,” Jin Zixuan said after Lan Xichen had continued on his way. “If the Cold Springs live up to their name, it's going to be *freezing* in there.”

“Too cold for your delicate feathers, Peacock?” Jiang Cheng teased. Nie Huaisang hadn't been able to stop the nickname, but thanks to the efforts to actually include Jin Zixuan in their activities and the Jin heir's slow but solid acceptance into the group, it was meant more in jest than any true dislike. The fact that Jin Zixuan wasn't sticking his foot in his mouth constantly about Jiang Yanli helped too, as Nie Huaisang was pretty sure that had been a good portion of why Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng had so disliked him in the first timeline.

Jin Zixuan snorted indelicately. "I don't see you offering to go either, Cat," he pointed out, giving as good as he got. The two unlikely... Well, Nie Huaisang wouldn't call them *friends*, per se, not even after six months in one another's company ...companions, then, kept bickering all the way back to the visiting disciples' quarters, only parting ways when they reached the rooms given over to the Jin contingent. Nie Huaisang shook his head once he was alone, an amused smile flitting about his mouth.

He went in search of Wen Ning and Wen Qing, eventually finding the two on the archery practice field. It was a small area since the Lans didn't actively practice it all that much, but still respectable nonetheless. Nie Huaisang waited until Wen Ning paused in his shooting before calling out to the siblings.

"Wen Ning! Wen Qing! There you are. I've got some... interesting news for you."

Wen Ning lowered his bow, his puzzlement clear to see as Nie Huaisang approached him and his sister. "You do?"

"Yes, I do." Nie Huaisang cleared his throat, and then, after a quick glance around the area to make sure it was just them, continued on with, "Wei Wuxian just left to go to the Cold Springs."

"Wh- *Oh*."

Wen Qing closed her eyes at her brother's brief bafflement. "Right. Well, I guess... We pretend like we know nothing, just like we have been," she said, opening her eyes once more. "We'll 'help' with the search and try to be the ones first on the scene when they do finally emerge."

Nie Huaisang nodded. "Right." He paused as a thought hit him. A delighted grin that would make both his brothers *very* nervous spread across his face. "Hey, how would you two like to help me with something?"

Wen Qing shot him a wary look. "That depends on what it is."

"Oh, you'll see.."

As planned, they 'helped' with the search for Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji when it became clear that the two young men hadn't returned from the Cold Springs, with at least one of them staying in the general area of the hidden entrance as much as possible. When the two of them finally did emerge, Nie Huaisang and Wen Ning had just started up the path to check once more on the area. The timing couldn't have been any more perfect.

"Wei Wuxian! Lan Wangji!" Nie Huaisang waved his fan at them to catch their attention, hurrying his pace with Wen Ning doing the same alongside him. "There you are! Where have you been? It's been a day and a night since anyone last saw you!"

"A day and a night?" Lan Wangji asked as he and Wei Wuxian go to their feet, looking as surprised as Nie Huaisang had ever seen him at his current age.

Wen Ning nodded. "Mm. Zewu-jun has been looking all over for you as well. We all have."

"We've all been worried," Nie Huaisang added. "Where did you go?"

He pointedly looked down at their still-ribbon-bound wrists and then let a surprised expression blossom on his face. “You ran away to get betrothed? But you didn't have to make everyone worry just for that, even if it is rather romantic. Honestly, *da-ge* would've said yes in a heartbeat.” He tapped his closed fan against his mouth thoughtfully. “Well, maybe a *few* heartbeats.”

“Oh! Congratulations, Wei-*gongzi*, Lan-*xiong*!” Wen Ning said happily, bestowing a bright smile on them. Nie Huaisang had to hold back raucous laughter at the expressions on Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji's faces, though Lan Wangji hid his startled surprise better.

“W-what? We're not betrothed!” Wei Wuxian spluttered, his cheeks going dark.

“Oh? I'm pretty sure that ribbon says differently,” Nie Huaisang said, only just managing to keep a straight face. “Of course, your partnership would have to be approved by elders from both our sects. I assume you made sure to get permission from at least *one* Lan elder. And besides, you're only half-betrothed; you still need to do it the Nie way as well. I know *da-ge* has been keeping several samples of the appropriate quality jade aside back home. We'll have to look at them when we get back to see which one will suit Lan-*xiong* best, Wuxian.”

“But-”

“Don't you *want* to be betrothed?” Wen Ning asked, and Nie Huaisang could've kissed him right then and there for the aura of befuddled innocence he was radiating as he interrupted Wei Wuxian's protests. “You've told us you've liked Lan-*xiong* almost ever since you got here. A betrothal seems almost natural at this point, doesn't it?”

Wei Wuxian looked helplessly at Lan Wangji, whose expression had smoothed back out to its regular blankness. Only the way his ears had gone a dark pink betrayed his true feelings, though the fact that he had yet to remove the ribbon from around their wrists when he'd had ample time to do so also gave him away.

“Do- Is it true? What they're saying?”

“The ribbon is sacred,” Lan Wangji replied. “Wei Ying knows this. I told you. It can only be touched-”

“-by parents and significant others,” Wei Wuxian finished, sounding rather distant. “Lan Zhan, I- Would you really want that? With me, I mean?”

Lan Wangji considered the question before nodding once. “Wei Ying is... important to me. If you want this-” He held up their joined hands between them. “-then I will speak with *xiongzhang* and *shufu* to begin the negotiations with Nie-*zongzhu*. But only if you want.”

“Wha- Lan Zhan! Of course I do!” Wei Wuxian replied quickly.

Nie Huaisang placed a subtle hand on Wen Ning's elbow, catching his companion's attention.

“I think they're going to be here a while,” he muttered. “Shall we go tell the others they've been found?”

Wen Ning looked over at Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian. The two of them were lost in their own world, speaking in low, urgent tones with one another.

“We probably should,” he agreed. “Though leaving them without an escort...”

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes. “Lan-*laoshi* would probably *qi*-deviate on the spot,” he muttered. “Alright, alright. You go ahead and run back since you’re faster. I’ll stay here and watch the two lovebirds.”

Wen Ning bobbed his head in a quick nod before leaving. Nie Huaisang sighed quietly to himself and then took a seat on a large rock at the side of the path, idly fanning himself as he kept an eye on the others. On the one hand, he didn’t regret nudging Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian together a little earlier- gods forbid they wait another twenty or so years before getting together like they had the last time -but he had little doubt that they’d be just as insufferably sappy and romantic with one another now as they were then. It was a small price to pay for their happiness, he supposed.

Nie Huaisang shrugged and then took a book out of his sleeve, glancing up occasionally to check on the two of them from time to time. By the time Lan Xichen came hurrying up the path with Wen Ning in tow, Lan Wangji had put his ribbon back where it belonged, but he’d kept hold of Wei Wuxian’s hands once it was back on. Nie Huaisang looked up from his book just in time to see the surprised yet pleased expression flash across Lan Xichen’s face when he saw his younger brother actually willingly holding hands with another person, not to mention standing so closely to Wei Wuxian as well.

With his book back in his sleeve, Nie Huaisang got to his feet, absently dusting himself off before going to join Wen Ning as Lan Xichen spoke with Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian.

“That went better than expected,” Wen Ning murmured.

“Mm. It did.” Nie Huaisang agreed. “It’ll change a lot of things.”

“Maybe, but I think it’ll only be for the better.”

Nie Huaisang hummed in agreement as he tucked his hands into his sleeves. Things certainly would change after this. He just hoped they would change enough to allow all those he cared for to live happy, long lives.

Nie Mingjue strode through the gate of the Cloud Recesses, the jade pass token hanging from his belt vibrating slightly as it interacted with the wards there. He nodded to the various disciples and Lan clan members he recognized as he made his way through the grounds. He heard Wei Wuxian before he saw him, a huff of laughter leaving him as he made his way to the pavilion where he was to meet the others.

“Oh, come on, I’m not *that* bad,” Wei Wuxian was protesting as Nie Mingjue approached. Lan Xichen, Lan Wangji, and Nie Huaisang were all there, as was Wen Ning, much to Nie Mingjue’s surprise. He’d never really had much of a chance to interact with Wen Ning before or after the whole Ghost General business, but the way he easily fit in with the group of young men around him had Nie Mingjue immediately warming to him. It also didn’t hurt that Nie Huaisang thought so highly of him, either.

“Do I want to know why you’re not ‘that bad’?” Nie Mingjue asked dryly as he stepped into the pavilion. His arrival garnered a short flurry of motion as the requisite bows and greetings were

exchanged, though Nie Mingjue did notice that Wen Ning had taken on a wary turn as he greeted him with a bow and a quiet, “Nie-zongzhu.”

As soon as everyone was seated around the low table in the center of the pavilion once more, Nie Mingjue turned his attention to Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian.

“So. You two are betrothed?”

“Only in the Lan way,” Lan Wangji replied, placing a calming hand on Wei Wuxian's wrist as the other went to speak. “It was...” He hummed, seeming to try to find the correct words. Nie Mingjue waited patiently, pouring himself a cup of tea as he did so. “It was wrong not to seek your permission first, Nie-zongzhu, but I do not regret it.”

That had Nie Mingjue raising an eyebrow. “So bold, Lan-er-gongzi,” he said after checking his tea and then taking a sip. He let Lan Wangji stew for several long seconds before continuing on, because he sure as hell wasn't going to say *no*, but he was still an older brother and it was his prerogative to look out for his siblings. And if it meant he could tease them while doing it, then so much the better.

“As... unorthodox as it is,” he continued on when it looked like Wei Wuxian was about to combust due to the sheer amount of anxiety he was radiating, “I find I cannot disapprove of the match. But-” He set down his cup with a clink of porcelain against lacquered wood. “-you will observe the courting rites of both the Lan and the Nie, and you won't marry until both of you are at least eighteen. I know our world places you as adults even now, but I won't have either of you making a rash decision in your haste to get married, especially in the... complex times we're currently in.” He smirked. “Besides, I'm sure it'll take at least that long to figure out which of you will be marrying into which clan, not to mention a whole host of other things.”

The tension that had sat heavy like fog around the table broke once he was done speaking. Nie Mingjue was glad to see the true happiness in Wei Wuxian's eyes, Lan Wangji's normally stoic expression softening greatly when he looked at his betrothed. He let the chatter go on for a few more minutes, enjoying his tea and the company. Only once his tea was done did Nie Mingjue set his cup down and steel himself for the coming conversation.

“What did you two find in that cave?”

Eight syllables was all it took to bring the tension back. Lan Xichen paused in the midst of reaching for the teapot, sighed, and then picked it up to top up his cup.

“This is perhaps not the best place to speak of such things.”

Nie Mingjue waved a hand dismissively before turning to his brother. “Huaisang, help me protect the secret.”

Huaisang nodded and then got to his feet, stepping away from the table as Nie Mingjue did the same. They bowed to Lan Xichen in apology before standing back to back, Nie Mingjue facing west and Nie Huaisang east. The others watched as gold and blue-white spiritual energy spiraled around the two brothers in a tight corkscrew before exploding outwards, the vague shape of a powerful tiger forming from the gold energy and that of a long, sinuous dragon from the blue-white energy. The whole pavilion shimmered with the newly placed ward before the latter faded to a near-invisible heat haze in the late afternoon sun.

Much to his credit, Nie Mingjue thought as he and his brother retook their seats, it was Wen Ning who broke the stunned silence.

“Wh- What was *that*?”

“A Nie privacy ward, one meant to keep all sounds within it from leaving. It takes two of the main bloodline to create or break it. Your sect has their Dire Owl, the Jin their messenger butterfly. This is one of our specialties,” Nie Mingjue said as he poured another cup of tea. “I know it's rude to cast such things within another's domain, but whatever was in the cave is more important than politeness. No one can hear what's going on between us, even if they were standing right outside the pavilion.”

“Fascinating,” Lan Xichen said. “So. The cave. It's not something usually spoken about outside of our clan.”

“Understandably so.” Nie Mingjue drank some of his tea. “But something tells me that whatever was in there will affect the whole of the world regardless of clan or sect secrets.”

Lan Xichen watched him for a long moment and then nodded once. “They found a piece of Yin Iron,” he said. “It was sealed in there by our ancestor, Lan Yi, and guarded by her until recently. She entrusted it to our brothers to see it either protected better or destroyed entirely.”

“Wen-zongzhu is looking for the Yin Iron to collect it all,” Wen Ning said, looking down at his hands briefly before focusing on Lan Xichen. “It's why my sister and I are here, though I swear we haven't actually been looking for it! Honestly, we've been trying to find a way to get away from him. He's only let us live because *jiejie* is useful to him, and I'm...” He smiled lopsidedly. “Well, he doesn't consider me much of a threat.”

“More a fool him, then,” Nie Mingjue declared, earning a wide-eyed expression of surprise from Wen Ning. “The Yin Iron is dangerous, and none of us want to see it fall into Wen Ruohan's hands. I take it you have the piece you were entrusted with sealed away somewhere?”

“Yes,” Lan Wangji said. “*Shufu* is guarding it currently.”

“Why can't we just destroy it?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Melt it down in a forge or drop it into the sea?”

“The latter may cause problems with the beasts in the sea,” Lan Xichen said. “As for melting it down, doing so could release all of the resentful energy stored within the metal, and the same problem would be had. I'm not sure it could be destroyed without causing massive damage to the world.”

“Which means we need to find a way to contain it that no one else can break,” Wei Wuxian mused. “Or try to cleanse it, but if spending hundreds of years in the Cold Cave didn't do it, I'm not sure what could.”

Nie Huaisang idly played with his teacup, his distant expression a familiar one to Nie Mingjue. He'd seen it when his brother was deep in thought about something, and knew better to interrupt until Nie Huaisang surfaced. Both his brothers were highly intelligent, but that intelligence manifested so differently in them. Wei Wuxian was all blazing fire and popping embers of ideas, while Nie Huaisang was a flowing river with hidden currents that could sweep one's footing away if care wasn't taken.

"Maybe... Maybe destruction isn't the cure, but rather neutralization," Nie Huaisang said after a few minutes.

"What do you mean?" Wen Ning asked curiously.

"Well, the Cold Spring and Cave are meant to help heal and pull away excess Yin energy, right?"

"Yes," Lan Xichen confirmed.

"If that's the case, then surely there are places where it's the opposite? Somewhere that has a lot of Yang energy may be enough to, if not neutralize it completely, then to lessen the effects of the Iron greatly so that it can then be destroyed," Nie Huaisang continued on. "I'm not sure where those might be, but surely one exists if places like the Cold Spring and Cave do."

"That'll have to be something to research, but it's a good thought," Nie Mingjue said approvingly. "Regardless, we should focus more on not letting Wen Ruohan get more pieces than he already has."

"He only has one right now, as far as we know, though he's sent people out to look for more," Wen Ning said. "He suspects one is here, and there are several other places he thinks they might be, though if he's moved on them..." He shrugged helplessly. "We only know so much here. I know *jiejie* has... friends ...who keep her abreast of news from back home, but Wen-*zongzhu* is very smart and will stop at nothing to get what he wants."

"Then we just need to make sure that we get there before him," Wei Wuxian said. "Using what you know about his plans will let us get at least a half-step ahead of him, right?"

"Possibly, but he has ears and eyes everywhere," Wen Ning warned. "What do you think the Waterborne Abyss was all about?"

"You think it was sent here by him?"

"It makes sense," Nie Mingjue said in response to Lan Xichen's question. "Distraction tactics to take eyes off of his search. Gusu Lan is one of the stronger sects, so having you distracted bodes well for him and gives him time to look without worry."

He drained his tea, half-wishing it was something stronger, and then kept talking. "I would suggest strengthening your wards, both around and in the Recesses. Fire is a favored tool of the Wen fighters. It would likely be beneficial to adjust them accordingly."

Nie Mingjue hated to be a source of worry for Lan Xichen, especially when he was still so new in his role as sect leader- his father had finally passed the duties fully on to him a few months prior - but he knew that it was necessary if it meant they could save however many people in the long run that had fallen so early in the war the last time.

"I'll take your advice into consideration," Lan Xichen said, looking very tired for his young age. "As for the Yin Iron, we'll have more time to devote to it once the visiting disciples are gone."

"If you need any help whatsoever, we're here to give it," Nie Mingjue assured him. He glanced at the sky beyond the pavilion. "Ah. In better news, isn't it almost time for the lantern lighting ceremony?"

Nie Huaisang perked up excitedly. "It is!" he said, getting to his feet. "We'd best go join the others to make our lanterns before it gets too dark."

His enthusiasm made Lan Xichen smile wearily. Nie Mingjue would take it, though he knew even such smiles would be few and far between over the next year or so. As Nie Huaisang and the other younger men said their goodbyes and then left the pavilion, Nie Mingjue checked the teapot and then set it aside when he found it to be empty.

"I'm sorry for ruining what should be an auspicious day," he said. Lan Xichen shook his head.

"No need. It was necessary to talk about."

"Still, I feel bad." Nie Mingjue watched Lan Xichen start to gather the teacups and other various dishes back onto the tray they'd initially been on before starting to help. "Meng Yao sends his regards, by the way."

That brought a far more relaxed and pleased smile to Lan Xichen's face. "Does he?"

Nie Mingjue nodded as he collected the last few cups. "He does. He was busy speaking with the farmers about the distribution of crop seeds when I left."

"He works hard."

Nie Mingjue grunted. "Sometimes too hard," he said exasperatedly. "I've come across him half-asleep on reports of one kind or another more often than not these days. He's my head deputy, but that doesn't mean he needs to take all the work on his own shoulders."

"Have you told him that?"

"Yes, and he does it anyways." Nie Mingjue shook his head. "He's been with us just over eight years. You'd think he'd know just how highly valued he is by now, both by me and the sect in general."

"Habits made young can be hard to break," Lan Xichen mused. "I suppose you'll just have to keep telling him he's doing a good job and rewarding him for it."

Nie Mingjue hummed. He wanted to do more than just treat Meng Yao as a treasured subordinate, but he couldn't change his ways right then, not with the looming war. Besides, what he *really* wanted to do was to get Lan Xichen and Meng Yao in one room together and propose a courting between the three of them, but he was also stubborn. He was going to do it properly or not at all, and that meant designing and commissioning the proper courting tokens.

The design he had in mind was complex, so it probably would be best to have the artisans start as soon as he got back to Qinghe. They'd be sworn to complete secrecy, naturally, as it wouldn't do to have the news that Nie Mingjue had requested triad courting tokens be made to get out too soon. The war would likely delay things, but he was willing to wait if it meant the tokens would be the best they could be.

Nie Mingjue shook his head before getting to his feet. Enough wool-gathering for a future that could change at any second. Now was the time to live in the moment.

“Why don't we get these back to the kitchens and then go watch the ceremony?” he suggested, taking the laden tray from Lan Xichen.

“The ward?”

“Huh? What about it?”

Lan Xichen laughed softly. “Are you going to just leave it?”

“I can take it down if you want,” Nie Mingjue said with a shrug that set the crockery clinking faintly, “or it can be left alone.”

“As loathe as I am to ruin your and Huaisang's hard work, it'd probably be best to take it down,” Lan Xichen said. Nie Mingjue nodded and then handed the tray back. He used the edge of Baxia to cut his thumb and then smeared it on one of the wooden posts supporting the roof. The ward shimmered and then faded along with his blood, leaving the pavilion in its former state. Nie Mingjue took the tray once more and allowed Lan Xichen to lead the way to the kitchens, their conversation casual as they went.

Later at the lantern lighting ceremony, Nie Mingjue watched as the visiting disciples let their lanterns- specially enchanted to safely go out and then dissolve into harmless bits of ash after a certain amount of time aloft -float up into the sky and then make their wishes or pledges afterwards. He nodded with approval at the fact that Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian had sent their lantern aloft together. Good. A show of unity before anyone truly knew they were together.

His attention switched to Nie Huaisang and Wen Ning, who were also standing close to one another. Their shared lantern had a fan and the image of a broken chain on it, the candle within lending a golden cast to the white paper surrounding it. Nie Mingjue hoped that their hearts wouldn't be broken by the war, even if they'd technically already lived through it once before. So many things had changed that it was hard to say how the war would go.

If nothing else, though, Nie Mingjue would fight to his last breath to see his brothers happy, and if he thought he could keep them away from the fighting, he would, but he knew better. All he could hope for was for a greater level of success than before, and that was worth fighting for.

So You Want to Start a War (in the Age of Icons)

Chapter Notes

Any recognizable dialogue (C) the creators/writers of *The Untamed*. Hopefully this'll be one of the last times I have to borrow so heavily from the show.

Also, a fair warning:

The Xuanwu of Slaughter can have a snack, as a treat (non-graphic minor character death by snake-turtle monster)

Nie Huaisang watched from the sidelines of the training ground with Wei Wuxian as a group of Nie disciples went through their paces under the strict eye of Captain Shao Hai, the two of them completely ignored by the men and women in front of them. Neither of them minded, as Captain Shao was notorious for snapping at people who interrupted his training sessions. They were only there because that particular area of the training grounds was directly en route to Nie Mingjue's office, and they knew that Meng Yao would have to go through there at least partially in order to get to the other areas of the Unclean Realm once he was done with the meeting he was currently having with the sect leader. It had become a habit for one or both of them to take up a post in the shadows at the edges of the training ground and provide Meng Yao with a buffer from the captain's pointed barbs when they knew the two men's paths would intersect there on a given day.

Even though Meng Shi hadn't practiced her former profession in almost nine years, there were still those who looked down on her for what she'd done to keep herself and her son alive, Captain Shao among them. Then again, he was also rather arrogant and full of himself without that, but presented a good face when Nie Mingjue was around that mostly managed to hide his flaws. Nie Huaisang hadn't been fooled at all, and after only a few encounters with him, neither had Wei Wuxian, thus their campaign to make sure Meng Yao spent as little time in Captain Shao's presence as possible.

It mostly worked, though they weren't always able to be there for him. Things appeared to have gotten worse over the six months they'd been in the Cloud Recesses, even with the help of Mo Xuanyu and Nie Yang filling in for Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian from time to time. There was only so much a twelve-year-old and a ten-year-old could do to stop a fully grown person bullying another, but their efforts were appreciated nonetheless.

Nie Huaisang looked up from his quiet conversation with Wei Wuxian when he heard the familiar measured tread of Meng Yao's boots echoing down the path leading into the training grounds, a lull in the movement of the disciples there allowing the sound to carry properly. He nudged Wei Wuxian to make him straighten up from his slouch against the pillar they'd been standing near and drew Lengfeng from his belt. A twist of his wrist saw the fan snap quietly open.

“Ready?”

Wei Wuxian smirked, pushing lazily away from the pillar.

“Of course.”

They stayed in the shadows, watching as Meng Yao rounded the corner with a few scrolls in his arms. His relaxed posture tensed when he saw that the yard was in use by Captain Shao and his fighters, and his expression went painfully neutral. Meng Yao started to make his way around the edge of the area opposite from where Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian were, keeping his gaze fixed on the exit. Captain Shao looked over to see who had intruded on his training session, freezing like a hunting dog catching a favorable scent when he saw Meng Yao and then smirking viciously.

“Ah, Meng Yao. I was wondering who would be stupid enough to interrupt my important work with such a horrible smell,” he drawled, signaling for the training to stop. “I would think the stink of the whorehouse to have faded by now, but apparently not.”

Meng Yao kept going, his back and shoulders stiff. Wei Wuxian stepped forward, ready to step up to Meng Yao's defense, but Nie Huaisang stopped him, his eyes widening.

“Wait,” he murmured from behind his fan. “Look.”

He tipped Lengfeng towards the path Meng Yao had come from, Wei Wuxian freezing when he saw Nie Mingjue coming around the corner. Captain Shao hadn't noticed him, as his attention was fixed solely on Meng Yao, but the other disciples had, with the smarter members of the group quickly moving out of their sect leader's way as he strode towards Captain Shao with a scowl. Nie Mingjue came to a halt four feet or so behind his subordinate and crossed his arms, waiting for him to turn around.

Captain Shao scoffed as Meng Yao continued to go towards the exit, doing his best to ignore the insults. “A coward *and* a whore's son. I don't know why Nie-*zongzhu* keeps you around. Unless it's to warm his bed, I suppose. I'm sure you picked up some tricks from your mo-”

“Shao Hai!”

Captain Shao turned, the color draining from his face when he saw Nie Mingjue standing so close and clearly having heard almost every word he'd said.

“N-Nie-*zongzhu*! I wasn't expecting you to be here!”

“Clearly,” Nie Mingjue said flatly. “You seem to be *very* full of words today, Captain. Since you're so talkative, remind me: what was the profession of Nie Qiangshan, our sect's founder? Surely you remember our sect's great history if you can remember something that happened *nearly a decade ago*.”

Captain Shao straightened up to near-attention, keeping his eyes on fixed on Baxia's hilt sticking up over Nie Mingjue's shoulder. “A butcher, sir!”

“A butcher,” Nie Mingjue echoed as Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian moved to flank him on either side.

“The Nie sect has never cared about a person's circumstances of birth or their past save for if they were truly irredeemable,” Nie Huaisang added, lazily flicking his fan back and forth. “We only care about skill, honor, and loyalty, two of which you are not showing at the moment, and haven't been showing for quite some time.”

A flash of furious humiliation passed across Captain Shao's face at the reprimand from someone at least half his age, though he didn't dare to say anything given Nie Huaisang's rank and the presence of Nie Mingjue. Nie Huaisang knew his brother would have something to say about it later- *many* things, he suspected -but that wasn't important at the present. What was important was hammering home the point that Meng Yao was not to be trifled with.

“Nie-*zongzhu*, I- My words were... ill-chosen,” Captain Shao tried, making Wei Wuxian snort sharply.

“That's one way to say you didn't realize you were going to get caught.”

He stepped away from Nie Mingjue's side and went over to Meng Yao, who had been watching the whole interaction with wide eyes, the scrolls held close to his chest. Nie Huaisang joined him, leaving Nie Mingjue to deal with Captain Shao on his own.

“What is going *on*?” Meng Yao asked quietly.

“What should've happened ages ago,” Nie Huaisang said, patting him on the shoulder with his free hand. “Trust *da-ge* to deal with this.”

“If I can't trust you to treat my Head Deputy with the respect and dignity he deserves, then I certainly can't trust you to teach those under you to do the same,” Nie Mingjue told Captain Shao. “As of this moment, you're relieved of duty until I can find a more fitting role for you in the sect, assuming one exists. I-”

The sound of rapidly moving footsteps echoed off the walls of the courtyard before Mo Xuanyu darted around Nie Huaisang and the others, only skidding to a stop near Nie Mingjue. He bowed quickly, his normally neat hair escaping from his braids from his dash across the compound.

“Nie-*zongzhu*! I apologize for interrupting, but there are people at the front gate asking for you and Nie-*gongzi*!”

“Thank you, A-Yu. Did they seem threatening?”

Mo Xuanyu shook his head. “No, sir! There's just two of them. They said they had important information. Nie Lian is keeping an eye on them along with the other gate guards. She sent me as a runner.”

“You did well. Go get some water,” Nie Mingjue said. He turned briefly to Shao Hai. “Go to your quarters. I'll send word for you once I'm done with this. Huaisang!”

“Here, *da-ge*!”

“With me. The rest of you are dismissed.”

The two of them left the training yard, waiting until they were out of earshot of the others before speaking.

“I don't-” Nie Huaisang frowned. “This didn't happen before.”

“A-Yang isn't a murderer in possession of a piece of Yin Iron this time around,” Nie Mingjue pointed out in low tones. “How... Why did he look so much older than he actually was? Did he just start growing early?”

Nie Huaisang sighed and then matched his brother's speaking levels. "The Yiling Patriarch had a theory about that. He said that the resentful energy preferred a more... *mature* wielder. It's why he looked more like a man in his mid-twenties after the Burial Mounds than his actual age. He thinks that from the moment the Yin Iron piece came into Xue Yang's possession, it started to mold him into someone that could properly wield it without going into *qi*-deviation. He may have had the body of a sixteen or seventeen year old when we first met him, but mentally he was still very young. His later actions in life seem to show that he never really got past that. He didn't seem to grasp the fact that a lot of his actions would have long-term consequences like most adults can."

Nie Mingjue nodded tersely as they reached the main gate. It was open and they could see several heavily armed guards keeping a wary eye on the two unknown visitors. Nie Huaisang gasped when he realized who it was and hurried his pace until he was nearly running to greet them.

"Wen Ning! Wen Qing! What are you two doing here?"

This was not part of the plan at *all*. They were supposed to still be in Nightless City until the war started and they were able to slip away in the confusion. The two looked exhausted and travel-worn; Wen Ning seemed about five minutes away from collapsing onto the dusty ground. Wen Qing looked over at him, sighed, and then spoke.

"We came to warn you. Wen Chao and his men are on the way. We're maybe a day ahead of them. They..." She shook her head. "I don't know what excuse they're going to give, but they want to see the Unclean Realm razed. We left as soon as we heard, though hopefully they've believed the excuse that we've gone to Yunmeng to visit family there."

Nie Huaisang turned to his brother, his eyes wide. "We can't let Wen Chao--"

"We won't," Nie Mingjue assured him. "Nie Lian!"

"Sir!"

"Go get the junior disciples under eighteen, civilians, and other non-combatants into the Under-Caverns," he ordered. "Once everyone is in there, seal yourselves in. Take... nine others with you to guard the entrances."

Nie Huaisang felt more than a little helpless, his fan fluttering aimlessly in his hand before he tucked it away in his sleeve and went to help Wen Qing with her brother.

"Let's get you two inside," he said, wrapping an arm around Wen Ning's waist. "We'll get you set up in the Under-Caverns so we can truthfully tell him that you're technically not *in* the Unclean Realm."

"I'd be happy to go anywhere so long as it's safe and has somewhere to sleep."

"It is and does, don't worry," Nie Huaisang assured her.

He led them through the city and into a seemingly innocuous courtyard. A large stone lion stood in the center, one paw resting on an embroidered ball made of the same pale stone. Nie Huaisang didn't pause in his route, going straight toward the lion and, much to the Wen siblings' surprise, phasing through it like it wasn't even there. They were brought along with him, a broad staircase spiraling down a good two hundred feet beneath the ground until it leveled out into a sprawling cavern that was far more well-furnished than any of its kind really had a right to be.

The main area of the cavern was kept clear, but there were side areas that were clearly demarcated for various tasks, like cooking, sleeping, socializing and so on. A smaller cavern held an area meant to serve as an infirmary. The whole populace of the Unclean Realm could fit in the main cavern with room to spare, which was the whole point of the Under-Caverns. Nie Huaisang took them over to the sleeping area, setting them up with a pair of beds in a corner.

“I'll bring you some clothes that'll help you blend in,” Nie Huaisang said once he'd helped lay Wen Ning down on one of the beds. “If you're willing to help us after the battle, Wen Qing, we would greatly appreciate it.”

Wen Qing shot him a look that was nearly as sharp as the acupuncture needles suddenly between her fingers. “You think I'd stand idly by when there are wounded?”

“Of course not!” Nie Huaisang held up his hands to ward her off. “But I also don't want to presume, either. I want to give you a *choice*.”

Wen Qing stared at him for a long moment before putting away her needles. “Fine. But don't presume I won't help again, alright?”

“Alright. I'm sorry I presumed in the first place.”

Nie Huaisang hurried off to get the promised clothes. The surface was a tightly controlled hive of activity, with Nie Mingjue in the center of it. Nie Huaisang was pleased to see their second cousin, Nie Zonghui, at Nie Mingjue's side as his second in command of the fighting forces. It was several years early- the last time that had happened was well after the Sunshot Campaign -but Nie Huaisang didn't care. He waved to his family members and then went to the storehouses to finish his errand, dodging around the others as he went.

By the time he returned to the Under-Caverns, Wen Ning was fast asleep and Wen Qing wasn't far behind him. Nie Huaisang set the bundle of clothes down on a side table, quietly drinking in the peaceful expression on Wen Ning's slumber-slack face.

“You care for him, don't you? Beyond more than just as a friend, I mean.”

Nie Huaisang let out a huff of laughter. “I've known him for a very long time,” he said softly. “It's hard not to love him. Nothing can happen until after the war, though. I'm not going to let what happened to either of you happen this time around. It shouldn't have happened then, to be honest. We failed you and the rest of the Dafan Wens, and for that, I'm eternally sorry.”

Nie Huaisang bowed low in a salute, hands held before him. Wen Qing caught hold of his hands and guided him back up to a standing position.

“You're not the one who should be apologizing. Unfortunately, the people who were responsible are not responsible *now*- at least, not yet. And hopefully they never will be,” she said. “Anyways, enough of what *won't* happen. If you and A-Ning decide to do something after the war about what's going on between the two of you, then you have my blessing. But don't you dare think for a second that if you break his heart that I'll leave you alone.”

Nie Huaisang laughed, making sure to keep the volume down so he didn't wake Wen Ning. “I would be coming to look for you to beg you to put me down if *da-ge* and *Wei-di* didn't get to me first,” he assured her. “Sleep well, Wen Qing. And... I know this might sound obvious, but maybe don't use your last name until the battle is over?”

“We won't be able to stay long afterward,” Wen Qing said. “We'll have to travel to Yunmeng, pick up something that can only be bought there- maybe some of their lotus wine -and then go back to Nightless City. Not that I want to, but we need to be there until the indoctrination camp at the very least.”

“The Xuanwu of Slaughter would be better,” Nie Huaisang said with a sigh. “You can escape in the confusion after that.”

Wen Qing considered it and then nodded. “Very well. Go. You'll likely be needed above-ground soon enough.”

“Probably,” Nie Huaisang agreed. “Draw the privacy screen across while you sleep so no one bothers you until you can change clothes. The other non-combatants will likely be coming down soon, if not early tomorrow morning.”

“Of course. Have a good night.”

“Sleep well.”

Nie Huaisang left the two of them to their own devices and went back topside, joining in the preparations for the battle to come.

The Wen contingent arrived a few hours after sunrise the next day, Wen Chao leading the way. Nie Huaisang stood at his brother's side in front of the open gate, Dafeng on his belt and Yaotou in its scabbard in his left hand.

“Wen-gongzi, to what do we owe this... pleasure?” Nie Mingjue asked, sounding for all the world like he was at a Discussion Conference and dealing with politics, not one of his most hated foes and a good score of enemy combatants at his gate.

“Ah, Nie-zongzhu, we have come to collect two of our wayward clan members,” Wen Chao said. “His Excellency is most eager to have them back in Nightless City.”

“There are none of your clan members in the Unclean Realm,” Nie Mingjue replied. Nie Huaisang approved of his brother's almost bored tone, as even though it was sure to annoy Wen Chao to the point of provocation, it was still very funny to see Nie Mingjue effectively put the greasy Wen heir in his place. Wen Chao smiled, though the expression looked more like a grimace than anything else.

“Then I'm sure you won't mind us taking a look? We had reports that they came this way.”

“No.”

“No, you won't mind? A good choice. I-”

“No, you may not come in,” Nie Mingjue clarified. “Not with swords drawn and an intent to fight.”

“Nie Mingjue! Standing against the will of His Excellency is not a wise move. The evil Lans of Gusu will be learning that lesson soon as well,” Wen Chao ground out.

“It may not be wise,” Nie Mingjue agreed as he drew Baxia from his back, “but like the mountains around us, I will not be moved. *Leave.*”

Wen Chao scowled, his face a rictus of fury. "Kill them all!"

Nie Huaisang drew his sword as the Wen fighters started to close the distance between them. The battle had begun.

The fighting took both forever and no time at all, or so it seemed. Later, Nie Huaisang would look back and see it in jumbled flashes- a blood spray here, a fallen comrade there, screams of the dying and wounded all around -but not really as a coherent whole. When Wen Chao and his men finally made their retreat and the front gates were sealed against any further intruders, the clean up began. The dead bodies of the Wen soldiers were set aside outside the city walls so their spirits could be settled to keep them from returning as fierce corpses and then buried, while the members of the Nie sect that had fallen were taken to a quiet cavern and the appropriate rites seen to before they were properly laid to rest.

Nie Huaisang didn't escape without injuries, though none of them were life-threatening. His arm was in a sling as it healed, bandages around his forearm keeping a salve against the deep slash there that would promote faster healing. Meng Yao had been wounded in defense of Nie Mingjue this time around again, though it was a righteous wound rather than one meant to try to garner sympathy. Nie Mingjue sent out a team of his least wounded disciples, including Shao Hai, to the Cloud Recesses to warn them of the Wens' potential attack. It would likely not stop it entirely, but hopefully the extra warning would keep as many people dying as had in the prior timeline.

Nie Huaisang made his way to the Under-Caverns, feeling exhausted from the steadily draining battle energy. He wanted nothing more than to fall into his bed and sleep for a solid twelve hours, but he wanted to check on the others first. It was part of his duty as heir to the sect, true, but it was also something he personally wanted to do. He broke the seal keeping the Under-Caverns protected with a murmured phrase and a swipe of blood on the mouth of one of the guardian statues, a chime ringing out in the chambers below to let those within know the battle was over.

The main cavern was bustling with people going about their business as usual. It took some time for Nie Huaisang to get to the area where he'd left Wen Ning and Wen Qing the previous night, as he kept being stopped by people wanting to know the outcome of the battle or to know how bad his injuries were. He did his best to answer the questions as he went, though some of them he had to refer to his brother for the more complex ones.

One of the cooks pressed a warm steamed bun into his hands as he moved through the crowd, making Nie Huaisang smile tiredly. He thanked the cook and then continued his search, absentmindedly eating the snack he'd been given even though he didn't really have much of an appetite. The sound of his name being called out had Nie Huaisang sighing softly and then turning with a quickly applied polite smile. He froze, his train of thought completely derailing at the sight in front of him.

Wen Ning was coming his way, looking far better than Nie Huaisang felt and dressed in Nie-style robes. He looked good in the slate grays and dark blues that the Nie sect favored, his hair pulled back away from his face with two simple braids at his temples that met at the back of his head and then the rest hanging loose. All of it combined had Nie Huaisang's brain short-circuiting hard; the hand holding his food hovering halfway to his mouth before he let it drop.

"I- Ning-xiong," he said once he managed to regain two brain cells to scrape together and form a mostly coherent sentence. "You look... well."

Wen Ning stopped in front of him, a sweeping glance taking in his disheveled and injured appearance. “And you look like you're about to fall over. Why haven't you rested yet?”

“Someone of the direct bloodline had to unseal the caverns,” Nie Huaisang said absently, his mind still half-stuck on Wen Ning wearing Nie colors and braids. It wasn't like it was unexpected- Nie Huaisang had picked out the clothes himself, after all, and the braids helped him to blend in even further, simple as they were -but to actually *see* him in them was a different story. “*Da-ge* is still recovering- he'll be fine, he just needs to actually rest more than me, assuming he'll stay still -and everyone else was too busy, so here I am.”

“And *Wei-gongzi*?”

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes. “*Da-ge* threatened to sit on him if he tried to run off to the Cloud Recesses with the rest of the scouting party. Nie Zonghui- our second cousin -is keeping an eye on him just in case. He's got minor injuries as well, but nothing life-threatening.”

Wen Ning nodded and then shepherded Nie Huaisang over to the area where he and Wen Qing had slept. “Sit, at the very least, and finish your food,” he directed, guiding Nie Huaisang onto his bed and then sitting next to him on the side with the uninjured arm. “*Jiejie* and I will have to leave soon to go to Yunmeng and then back to the Nightless City.”

Nie Huaisang frowned. “I don't like the idea of that.”

“Neither do I,” Wen Ning admitted, nudging Nie Huaisang to keep eating, “but it's what we've got to do. We'll see you there soon, at least.”

Nie Huaisang hummed, chewing his food as he contemplated the events to come. The more things diverged, the less chance they had of predicting what would happen. Certain major events still happened- case in point, the battle they'd just gone through -though with minor tweaks here and there.

“I've been preparing for that ever since we got back from the Cloud Recesses,” he said once his mouth was empty and his bun gone. “It's been mainly small things, but I think I confused Wei Wuxian when I ordered a guqin and a dizi.”

Wen Ning chuckled. “I can see why since you don't play either.”

“Mm, I can play the koudi, but-” Nie Huaisang shook his head. “I haven't touched one in years because of- well. Last time I did, it didn't go well.”

“That wasn't your fault,” Wen Ning insisted with a gentle nudge of his shoulder. Nie Huaisang smiled lopsidedly.

“Maybe so, but...” He shook his head and then yawned. “I still feel like I should've known something was wrong. I trusted too easily back then.”

“Well, you've learned now,” Wen Ning said, “and things have changed a lot.”

“Mm. True.”

Nie Huaisang yawned again and then leaned in against Wen Ning, resting his head on his friend's shoulder. All of the exhaustion he'd been fending off sluiced over him all at once like a bucket of

water. It wasn't long before he'd dozed off, curling into Wen Ning's warmth. A gentle hand woke him some time later, rousing him out of his slumber with a light shake.

“Huaisang.”

“Mm? *Da-ge*?”

Nie Huaisang opened his eyes to find that he had been rearranged to lay on the bed, a bolster pillow on either side of him keeping him from unintentionally rolling onto his injured arm. His brother was indeed standing there, looking more than a little banged up but otherwise no worse for the wear. Wen Ning was nowhere to be seen, but there were two bundles on the bed Wen Qing had used that told him all he needed to know.

“Oh. Are they gone?”

“They are. They left a while ago,” Nie Mingjue confirmed as Nie Huaisang sat up. “Come on, up you get.”

“Any news from Xichen-*ge* or the scouts?”

Nie Mingjue shook his head. “Nothing yet, though we still have some time. Come on. We need to keep preparing for what's to come.”

Nie Huaisang got to his feet, stretching as much as he could without aggravating his half-healed injury, and then followed his brother out of the Under-Caverns and into the waning light of the evening.

The summons to come to the Nightless City for the indoctrination classes four days after the attack on the Unclean Realm. Nie Huaisang and Nie Mingjue exchanged loaded glances before the former dragged Wei Wuxian off to his quarters.

“Huaisang? What's- what are you doing?” Wei Wuxian asked as Nie Huaisang opened a trunk that had been locked with a spell that would only recognize the combination of his blood and spiritual energy.

“Do you trust me?”

“What? Of course I do!” Wei Wuxian said, watching Nie Huaisang take out several sets of robes and place them on his bed. One set was in his size and the other in Wei Wuxian's. Both were in the Nie colors, naturally, with the wider sleeves that Nie Huaisang usually preferred rather than the closer-fitting ones Wei Wuxian tended to go for.

“Then you need to wear these while we're at the Nightless City,” Nie Huaisang said, gesturing at the robes before grabbing boots to go with them out of the trunk. “I know you usually like closer-cut sleeves, but these are important.”

“Are you going to tell me why?”

Nie Huaisang hesitated and then shook his head. “I can't. I'm sorry. But... you'll see in time, alright? I'm hoping things don't get too bad, but with the Qishan Wen...”

“...one can never tell,” Wei Wuxian finished. “Alright, I’ll wear them. Hopefully they won’t expect us to do any archery.”

Nie Huaisang sighed. “Do you really expect they’ll let us keep or use any weapons, Wuxian?” he asked. “It’s not classes at the Cloud Recesses. It’s an *indoctrination*. If it was us and we had those we considered enemies within our walls, we wouldn’t allow weapons either.”

“Are you going to take your fans?”

“Of course. For all the Wen know, they’re just fans. I didn’t use them in the battle here,” Nie Huaisang said, fishing out two small pouches from the bottom of the trunk and tossing one to his brother. “Here. It’s got medicinal herbs in it. I doubt they’ll take it from you. There’s a small pocket on the inside of your outer robes. Put it there.”

Wei Wuxian turned the pouch over in his hands, thumbs running over the embroidered cloth. “You’ve been planning this for a while, haven’t you?”

“What’s the sect motto?”

“A blade is only as worthy as its master?”

“Well, alright, yes, that’s the *official* one,” Nie Huaisang said with a roll of his eyes. “What’s the *secondary* motto?”

“Preparation is the key to winning a fight?”

“Precisely.” Nie Huaisang shut the trunk and then rose to his full height. “I’ve been having *da-ge* help me with this ever since you and Lan-xiong became betrothed and we learned of the Yin Iron. Better to be prepared than not. I’d hoped we wouldn’t have to use these, but...” He shook his head. “Never mind. Just wear the robes and boots. They’ve got cleaning arrays stitched between the layers so we won’t have to worry about laundry, and environmental ones as well. No use overheating when we have to deal with the volcanoes and whatnot.”

“Volcanoes?!”

The flight to Qishan was a grim one, with conversation between the members of the Nie party falling away as the glow of the active lava flows came into view. They landed outside the southern gate of the Nightless City, sheathing their swords as they were surrounded by a group of guards. Nie Huaisang ignored the derisive scoffs and comments coming from the guards as they were escorted up several flights of broad stairs and onto a plaza in front of a tiered structure where the other ‘visiting’ disciples were gathered. Grim nods were exchanged between Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang; neither of them had the energy to pretend that the situation they were in was any shade of good.

The contingent from Lotus Pier arrived twenty minutes or so after the Nie group, Jiang Cheng coming to a halt nearby. He glanced around with a faint frown.

“Where are the Lans?”

“We don't know,” Wei Wuxian said, his worry clear to everyone who could see him. Nie Huaisang didn't blame him given the circumstances. They hadn't had time to announce the betrothal, as the initial gifts were still being sorted out, among other things. It was likely that the announcement and exchange of initial gifts would have to take place after the war was said and done, but that only meant more time for the artisans to finish the carving of the jade token Wei Wuxian would give to Lan Wangji, as was traditional for the Nie.

Their conversation was cut off when a guard higher up on the tall flight of stairs called out, “Wen-gongzi is here!”

Nie Huaisang looked up to see Wen Chao coming down the stairs, trailed by two guards. His grip on Yaotou tightened, the engravings on the scabbard biting into his palm before he forced himself to calm down. If all went well, Wen Chao would be dead soon and there would be one less person to worry about in the future. After all, if Wen Chao died, Wang Lingjiao would have no more power in the Wen sect. Then again, since Wei Wuxian hadn't gone to live there like he had the first time around, it was less likely that Lotus Pier would be as much a target. Less, but not entirely impossible.

“Wen-gongzi is here! Form up in lines!” the guard called out again. Wen Chao came to a halt on a tier above them, a sneer rippling across his face as he surveyed the scene in front of him.

“Look at yourselves. You all look like sleepy, mangy dogs,” he said, running his hand over the pommel of his sword. “Pitiful.” He paused and then raised his voice. “Why the hell don't you bring him over? Hurry!”

Those gathered turned to see Lan Wangji coming up from behind, sword in hand. Naked relief swept over Wei Wuxian's face, though it quickly morphed into concern when he saw that Lan Wangji was limping. Nie Huaisang put a hand on his arm when he went to greet Lan Wangji, shaking his head.

“Not now,” he murmured. “There'll be plenty of time for you to ask questions later, alright?”

Wei Wuxian ignored him, quietly calling Lan Wangji's name a few times before one of the guards reprimanded him for talking.

“Since you are all here in Qishan,” Wen Chao said, drawing their attention back to him, “you will follow Qishan's rules. First and foremost, during the indoctrination, no one is allowed to carry weapons personally in case of disturbing His Excellency. Now, let us start. Hand in your swords one by one.”

There were several calls of refusal, but when no one stepped forward to put a face to the words, Wen Chao shook his head in disappointment. “It is precisely because of disciples like you, who know nothing about obedience and etiquette, whose cores are totally and utterly rotten, that His Excellency has decided to indoctrinate you. If your manners aren't corrected early on, some of you might attempt to challenge the authority and tread upon the Wen sect's heads. Confiscate their swords!”

Several guards came down with long, flat boxes that would fit several swords within them. Nie Huaisang leaned in to murmur in Wei Wuxian's ear.

“Remember, trust me.”

Wei Wuxian glanced over at him, nodded once, and then handed over Suibian to the guard without any fuss. Nie Huaisang did the same with Yaotou, and soon the others were grudgingly following their lead. No one seemed happy about it, but that was understandable given how important their sword was to a cultivator. Nie Huaisang winced when Jin Zixuan refused to give up his sword and drew Wen Chao's attention to himself. It was a few tense moments before Mianmian- and Nie Huaisang swore he would let her know she always had a place in Qinghe should things go the way they did last time and she left the Jin sect -managed to defuse the situation and convince Jin Zixuan to hand over his sword.

"This had better be worth it," Wei Wuxian muttered as Wen Chao had one of the guards hand out copies of *The Quintessence of the Wen Clan* to everyone to read and memorize.

"It will be," Nie Huaisang muttered back. "Just don't cause *too* much trouble, alright?"

"I'll do my best."

"You'd better. I don't want to have to explain to *da-ge* you got yourself seriously hurt or killed for mouthing off."

Nie Huaisang was relieved when they were escorted to the guest quarters a half hour or so later. They were quite nice for what essentially was a hostage situation, and even though he had to share with Wei Wuxian this time around, Nie Huaisang didn't mind. One quick privacy ward later and he even felt comfortable enough to relax some.

"So," he said as he took a seat on one of the beds, "this is going to be hard."

Wei Wuxian scoffed. "I know. They took our swords and everything."

"I did warn you."

"I know, I know. Still."

Wei Wuxian sat next to him with a heavy frown. "Do you think Lan Zhan is okay? He was moving so stiffly, even more so than usual. And we don't even know what happened to the Cloud Recesses, if anything, since the scouts hadn't come back before we left."

"I think we would've heard if the Lans were wiped out entirely," Nie Huaisang said, choosing his words carefully. "Wen Chao wouldn't be able to not brag about it if they were."

"I guess, but it doesn't make it much better."

Nie Huaisang patted him on the knee. "I know. We may be able to speak to him tomorrow, but you'll have to be subtle about it."

"Subtle?" Wei Wuxian huffed and then flopped back on the bed. "He's my betrothed. I shouldn't have to be *subtle* in order to talk with him. Even if we weren't betrothed, I shouldn't have to worry about that."

"Just because you could sweet-talk a donkey doesn't mean Wen Chao would allow it," Nie Huaisang said dryly. He got to his feet and went over to a table to begin reading his book. Wei Wuxian pushed up on to his elbows, eyebrows rising.

"You're actually going to read that?"

“The first few pages at the very least, yes. Wen Chao knows we won't be able to memorize the whole thing by tomorrow, but knowing at least some of what's in here will help keep his attention off us. Besides, *da-ge* said to not cause trouble if we can help it. After all, it's far too easy to arrange an 'accident' around here. We're in enemy hands, Wei Wuxian. We've got to be patient and bide our time until we can either escape or are let go.”

“I doubt they'll just let us go,” Wei Wuxian grumbled. “Not since they've got our swords.”

“We'll get them back, don't worry. It may just take some time.”

Nie Huaisang idly read through the first few pages, refreshing his memory on what was there. It was somewhat interesting; at least, more than most of the Lan rules were, anyways. Wei Wuxian watched him read, a disgruntled expression flashing across his face as he got up and went to fetch his own book from where he'd tossed it. He sat down across from Nie Huaisang and opened up his book, flicking through the pages until he paused.

“Well, this isn't a proverb I'd expect to come from the Wen Clan,” he said. Nie Huaisang looked up, blinking a few times as he focused on his brother.

“What is it?”

Wei Wuxian cleared his throat dramatically and then began to read. “Those who count on their clan and do evil at will shall all be executed. Not only shall they be executed, but also decapitated and reviled by the people to warn future generations.” He scoffed. “If the Wens actually followed this rule, there'd be precious few of them left.”

“True, but priorities change over the years,” Nie Huaisang pointed out. “Look at the Lan. Do you really think Lan An foresaw there being so many rules when he started his sect?”

“I still say it's impossible to follow all of them at the same time,” Wei Wuxian said. “I don't know how Lan Zhan does it.”

“I think it's more a matter of following those that make the most sense for the situation you're in,” Nie Huaisang mused. He'd had plenty of time to think about such things over the years, especially when in the middle of interminably boring Discussion Conferences. “The ones that govern day-to-day life would probably be the simplest to reconcile with one another. It's the more tricky ones that cause the problems and conflict with one another.”

“I guess.”

They kept reading until an imperious knock sounded on their door and a gruff voice announced that it was time for lights out. They got ready for bed, neither falling asleep for quite some time due to their situation.

The next morning found them standing on the terrace again, books in hand. Nie Huaisang braced himself for what he knew might happen and hoped wouldn't occur. He kept a close eye on Wei Wuxian as Wen Chao requested people to recite what they'd managed to memorize. When Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan refused to recite the Wen Clan's writings, Nie Huaisang reached out to Wei Wuxian, clasping one hand around his wrist loosely.

“Don't play stupid games,” he muttered. “Just do what they want and we can get through this.”

“Oh, don't worry about me,” Wei Wuxian said with a grin. “I've got this.”

He stepped forward with a bounce in his step and began to recite. Nie Huaisang swore sharply under his breath when he realized that it wasn't the correct proverbs and sayings, but the Lan rules. Predictably, Wen Chao reacted poorly, but much like the prior timeline, only sent him, Lan Wangji, and Jin Zixuan off to spread manure in the gardens. It was what happened *during* that punishment that had Nie Huaisang worrying. He wished he could send a message to Wen Ning or Wen Qing to run interference, but giving away that connection now would only create more trouble.

The only thing that soothed his worries was that Wen Ning was surely keeping an eye on the whole thing like he had last time and would come to Wei Wuxian's aid. That, and the fact that Wei Wuxian's fear of dogs wasn't as bad this time around, but given how big the monster in the dungeons was, it was a very cold comfort indeed. Nie Huaisang's suspicions were confirmed when Jin Zixuan joined him at the dinner table later that night, freshly scrubbed from a quick bath and wearing a change of clothes.

“What happened?”

Jin Zixuan sighed heavily as he picked up his chopsticks. “He ran afoul of Wen Chao in the gardens,” he said. “Insulted him straight to his face.” He shook his head. “Your *shidi* is something else.”

“He's an idiot, but he's my idiot,” Nie Huaisang agreed. “I just hope a night in the dungeons will help him realize this isn't some grand game like he seems to think it is.”

At breakfast the next morning, he made sure to grab extra food and wrapped it in a handkerchief to give to Wei Wuxian, knowing he wouldn't have been fed. When he finally spotted his brother, Nie Huaisang let out a sigh of relief. Wei Wuxian looked exhausted and was bitten and scratched in several places, but he wasn't bleeding out, which was all Nie Huaisang cared about.

“Wei Wuxian!”

“Good morning to you all!” Wei Wuxian said cheerily as he came to a halt at Nie Huaisang's side.

“What happened? What did they do to you?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“Oh, I'm fine, nothing to worry about, Jiang-xiong,” Wei Wuxian said. “These are just my glorious battle scars.”

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes. “Idiot. I told you not to make trouble.” He drew out the wrapped steamed bun from his sleeve. “Here. Eat this before you fall over.”

“Ah, such a loving brother!” Wei Wuxian grinned and took the bun. “A pity it's not osmanthus cakes.”

“Osmanthus cakes?” Nie Huaisang scoffed. “Are you kidding? Do you think we're still attending lectures back at Gusu? Just eat your food, alright?”

“Alright, alright.”

As he ate, Nie Huaisang noticed Wei Wuxian glance over at Lan Wangji, his feigned good mood fading when he saw the stress and grief barely hidden behind the other man's usual expressionless

mask. All of them straightened up when one of the guards announced Wen Chao's approach, Wei Wuxian quickly stuffing the rest of the bun into his mouth. Nie Huaisang drew in a quiet breath when he saw Wen Qing walking alongside Wen Chao, his heart rate immediately picking up.

He'd almost forgotten she'd been there, as the first time around he'd passed out from the heat before the news of the Xuanwu of Slaughter had come later that afternoon, but this time around he was determined to go to the cave with the others. The arrays woven into his robes would help with that, he was sure of it.

"Before today's indoctrination begins, I have a few announcements," Wen Chao said, resting his hands on his sword like a cane as he and Wen Qing came to a halt on the terrace above them. Nie Huaisang braced himself, glancing over at Lan Wangji briefly before focusing back on Wen Chao.

"First of all, as you all have probably heard, from now on, Cloud Recesses is under Qishan's control," Wen Chao continued on, earning murmurs from the gathered disciples. "And secondly, Qinghe Nie, who were insubordinate to our instructions and showed a lack of discipline, are deemed irreverent. His Excellency has ordered a crackdown."

"What happened to my older brother, then?" Nie Huaisang asked, even though he knew Wen Chao was lying through his teeth and that Nie Mingjue was actually okay. He made sure to project more than a little panic into his voice, not wanting to give the game away.

"He was a hothead who put up a desperate fight. What do you think happened?"

Nie Huaisang had to hold Wei Wuxian back from charging up the stairs and laying in to Wen Chao, knowing it wouldn't do any of them any good.

"Leave him," he hissed into his brother's ear before letting him go. "*Da-ge* is fine. If he wasn't, Wen Chao would've said it outright rather than inferred it."

"As for Lanling Jin, they have been appropriately cooperative. As long as you don't stir up trouble, I will guarantee your parents' safety," Wen Chao said. "And finally, there is Yunmeng Jiang. It is a shame that Jiang Fengmian is such a coward, hiding away in Yunmeng."

"Wen Chao!"

Jiang Cheng stepped forward, glaring for all he was worth at the Wen heir. Jin Zixuan put a hand on his shoulder and shook his head, earning a sharp huff from Jiang Cheng before he subsided. Wen Chao taunted him further for a little while before gesturing for a chair to be brought for him. Once he was comfortable, he set them to reading aloud from the *Quintessence*, having them do so for quite some time as two guards monitored them to make sure everyone was reading.

Nie Huaisang breathed a sigh of relief when the scout came running up a side path and darted up the stairs to speak with Wen Chao. His feet were aching and his stomach rumbling, as they hadn't paused for lunch or water. Most of the disciples had paused in their reading, watching the scout and Wen Chao speak, though the words were too distant and quiet to be heard. Eventually, Wen Chao ordered the books to be put away and to prepare for a night hunt, ignoring the protests that the disciples wouldn't be much use without their swords.

The trip to Dusk Creek Mountain was a slow one on foot, but Nie Huaisang and the rest of the hostages were more than happy to get away from the noxious atmosphere surrounding the Nightless City. They moved in a large group for the most part, though Lan Wangji trailed along at

the back due to his injuries. Wei Wuxian drifted back along the crowd to be with him, ready to support his betrothed should he need it.

They reached a relatively open area and began searching, albeit rather aimlessly given that there weren't any clear signs of the monsters the scout had reported. Nie Huaisang watched the others wander and then shook his head before heading away from the main area that was being searched and then crouching down to look at the ground. Jin Zixuan and Mianmian followed after him, though if it was out of curiosity or the want to get away from Wen Chao and Wang Lingjiao, he didn't know.

"What are you doing?" Mianmian asked, watching him brush his fingers over the ground lightly.

"Looking for tracks or spiritual residue," Nie Huaisang replied. "If what we're looking for is around here, then it should've left a sign of its passing. But I don't see any tracks beyond small things like squirrels and mountain voles, so I don't think we're quite in the right place."

"Do you hunt a lot?"

Nie Huaisang shrugged as he got to his feet and dusted his hands off. "Not as much as some of the others of my sect. *Da-ge* likes to hunt, especially with hawks and hounds, and he made sure all of us could survive on the land if necessary. Our sect's founder was very insistent that all of his disciples know how to hunt, field dress, butcher, and cook wild game no matter where they were."

Jin Zixuan looked him up and down, eyebrows rising. "You can do all that?"

"Just because I don't like to make a mess of myself doesn't mean I can't take care of myself as needed," Nie Huaisang retorted primly. "I just usually let the others do the messy work if at all possible."

"Alright, everyone, we're stopping for water and a short rest!" Wen Chao called out. "And I mean *short*!"

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes. "We'd best make use of it. There's no telling when we'll get another rest."

The rest period was far too short to relieve the major complaints of thirst and bodily aches, but Nie Huaisang and the others took as much advantage of it as possible, settling down on the rocky shore of the river and enjoying the break. All too soon, however, Wen Chao was yelling for them to resume the search. With a groan, Nie Huaisang shoved himself to his feet, briefly fantasizing about picking up one of the large rocks and tossing it at Wen Chao's horse's hooves to see it buck off its riders.

"What I don't get," Nie Huaisang said as they started walking again, "is why we're searching for a cave near a flat area and not in the foothills. It would make more sense to look there, wouldn't it?"

"And what would *you* know of such a thing?" Wang Lingjiao asked from nearby. "Shut up and keep looking!"

"I mean," Wei Wuxian said dryly as he and Lan Wangji joined the small group, "we *do* live near mountains in Qinghe. That's where you find caves."

Wang Lingjiao huffed at him and then flounced off, the Wen branding iron clutched tightly in her hand. Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes and then pulled a scrap of talisman paper out of the inside of his robes.

“Where did you get *that*?” Nie Huaisang asked, but before he could say anything further or get an answer, Wei Wuxian had marked it with a little bit of blood and spiritual energy and then sent it flying off, the mist cloaking the mountain across the river dissipating to reveal the dark maw of a cave. Getting to said cave involved fording the river and then making an even longer trek through the woods and up to its mouth, but once they were there, torches were lit and handed out to several people in the party.

Nie Huaisang kept close to his friends and brother, wary of the loose gravel and debris underfoot as they navigated the treacherous path deeper into the cave. When they finally reached the end of the path, it was to find a sharp drop-off with no clear bottom visible.

“Yes, it's here!” Wen Chao announced, sounding like a child on his birthday. “Go! Get down there!”

“It seems bottomless,” Wei Wuxian pointed out, and rightly so, “and we don't know what kind of monster is down there. If you don't clarify the situation, how can we get down there safely?”

Before any of them could stop him, Wen Chao had shoved Wei Wuxian down the scree-covered drop-off and out of sight. Nie Huaisang spun on the spot, staring wide-eyed at him.

“What did you do that for?!”

Wen Chao waved him off, instead turning to the men he'd brought along as insurance and directing them to tie ropes off so the rest of them could get down. Nie Huaisang huffed, and then, with a surge of spiritual power, pulled a move out of Wei Wuxian's book of ridiculous stunts and jumped down into the darkness, skidding to a halt a few feet away from his *shidi* with a spray of gravel.

“Wei Wuxian! Are you alright?” he asked, ignoring the ropes that came flopping down the slope and helping Wei Wuxian to his feet.

“I'm fine, don't worry about me,” Wei Wuxian assured him, and then grinned. “Look at you, jumping all over the place like a cricket!”

“Oh, shut up. I wanted to make sure your head wasn't cracked open like an egg.” Nie Huaisang brushed dirt and bits of stone off his brother as he spoke, trying to hide how scared he was with the gestures. “You seem alright to me- at least, for the time being. Can you *please* stop antagonizing Wen Chao?”

“All I did was make a good point,” Wei Wuxian said as the others joined them at the bottom of the slope. Nie Huaisang was surprised to see Wen Qing there but not the other Wens, though he certainly didn't mind. He gave her a minute nod as he stepped away from Wei Wuxian, and was gratified to see her return the small motion with one of her own.

“Oh, good, the rest of you made it down safely,” Nie Huaisang said. Jin Zixuan scoffed quietly.

“I would rather come down to fight whatever monster it is that we're here for than hear those idiots insult us,” he said, glancing back up the slope. Nie Huaisang snickered at that and then turned to look around the cavern they'd ended up in.

“Hey, anything unusual?” Wen Chao called down. There was more than one eye roll among the crowd of hostages, and no one bothered to answer him. “Hey, are you all dead already? How can you be as silent as the dead? What's going on?”

“Let's get moving before he comes down,” Jiang Cheng suggested. The others followed after him, stopping when they reached the shore of a large, murky pool and could go no further. A small islet sat low in the pool five or so feet from the shore, its rocky surface jutting above the surface of the water. They could still hear Wen Chao's shouts, which was strange given how far they'd traveled from the slope.

It wasn't long before the rest of the party joined them, the additional torches helping only a little with illuminating the gloom.

“It's a dead end!” Wang Lingjiao pouted.

“Impossible,” Wen Chao said. “Keep searching carefully.” He turned to some of the men he'd brought along. “You three, have somebody hung and bleeding to lure that thing out.”

“Nonsense!” Jin Zixuan protested. “Luring that thing with flesh and blood means leaving us to die!”

Things escalated from there. Nie Huaisang watched in astonishment as Wen Chao ordered his men to attack when Jin Zixuan refused to let Mianmian be used as bait. Chaos ensued, and he found himself back-to-back with Jiang Cheng with a stolen sword in hand as they defended themselves. He was distracted by the fight until he heard his brother call out.

“Hey! Stop there!”

Nie Huaisang turned to see Wei Wuxian standing on the rocky islet with Wen Chao, a sword at the latter's throat. The fighting screeched to an abrupt halt as the others noticed the same thing, swords lowering as an uneasy truce was temporarily called.

“Don't move, or I'll spill some of your young master's blood,” Wei Wuxian warned.

“Stop! Wei Wuxian, release him!” Wang Lingjiao called out.

“Don't move!” Wen Chao ordered. “Listen to Wei-gongzi.”

Nie Huaisang was going to kill his brother. Of all the stupid things to do in the middle of a battle, this had to top quite a few of them. He was about to speak but Wen Qing, the amazing being that she was, got there first.

“Wei Wuxian, don't act rashly,” she called out. “Everybody, put your weapons down.”

Only when Wen Chao nodded did the Wen fighters follow her directions. Nie Huaisang relaxed only the smallest of amounts, ready to start fighting again if necessary.

“Good. Now-” Wen Qing stopped when the ground beneath Wen Chao and Wei Wuxian began to move, water rippling around it.

“What the- Nie Huaisang, it's an earthquake?!” Wei Wuxian said, startled.

“No, it's not.” Nie Huaisang looked closer at the islet. “That's not an earth- Get off that thing! There's something under you!”

Seconds after he'd managed to get that out, Nie Huaisang was staring at the ugliest creature he'd ever seen in either of his lifetimes. It looked like the worst parts of a snake and a turtle mixed together, with cruelly sharp teeth lining its mouth. No one dared to move. Out of the corner of his eye, Nie Huaisang saw Wei Wuxian clap a hand over Wen Chao's mouth to keep him quiet.

“Quiet,” Lan Wangji said lowly as the Xuanwu slowly turned its head toward its unexpected riders. “Its vision is bad. If we don't make a sound, it won't attack us.”

Everyone watched with dread as the Xuanwu's head grew closer to Wei Wuxian and Wen Chao. Wei Wuxian stayed as quiet as he could, his chest barely rising and falling with his breathing, but Wen Chao did not. His cowardice got the better of him and he panicked, pushing Wei Wuxian's arm away and shouting to be rescued.

Wei Wuxian did his best to push Wen Chao out of the way, but the Xuanwu was quicker, its head snapping out lightning-quick and grabbing hold of the odious young man. Wang Lingjiao screamed high and shrill as the Xuanwu jerked its neck in one sharp motion, its teeth making short work of ending Wen Chao's life. It tossed his corpse into the pool for later consumption and then returned its attention to the others.

“Everyone leave!” Wang Lingjiao ordered before dashing back toward the exit. There was only a brief moment of hesitation before the rest of the Wen contingent followed after them, Wen Qing looking very reluctant to do so. Nie Huaisang gestured quickly for her to go, knowing she would have to leave in order to get Wen Ning and then go on the run. She nodded and then disappeared into the darkness.

Nie Huaisang doubted the ropes would still be in one piece by the time they got there, knowing how Wang Lingjiao was, but he continued to help fight the Xuanwu, picking up one of the discarded bows and firing whatever arrows he could get his hands on.

“Everyone, fall back to the entrance!” Wei Wuxian called out. “We can't keep fighting against this thing!”

As soon as they could, those fighting the Xuanwu broke off the attack and retreated, leaving the monster to lick its wounds. Nie Huaisang's prediction came true when they reached the slope and found the remnants of the ropes laying at the bottom, clearly having been cut through with a sword.

“Shameless bastards,” Jin Zixuan swore, picking up one of the pieces of rope and then examining it. “They've cut through them all. Without our swords, what can we do?”

“Look! They're blocking up the entrance!”

Nie Huaisang followed the path of Mianmian's pointing finger to the distant entrance, his stomach sinking at the clatter of rock against rock and the quickly waning light. He could hear the others curse and mutter among themselves and had to step away to clear his head. Right. He could do this. It would shatter some of the vaguely useless and weak persona he'd crafted, but getting out alive was more important than that. Besides, with his brother's reputation at his back, who would question him showing a little backbone now and again?

“Alright, everyone quiet!” Nie Huaisang pitched his voice to perfection, infusing it with the unquestionable authority of someone who had spent well over thirty years as a Sect leader as well as the infamous Nie battlefield diction that could be heard above the chaos of war. “We aren't going to escape if we're going to bemoan our circumstances or wait around for our parents to come collect us like we're children in the nursery hall. We're almost grown adults. We need to think for ourselves and find a way out of here.”

“He's right.”

All attention turned to Lan Wangji, who was standing at the edge of the crowd with Wei Wuxian at his side.

“What can we do?” Jiang Cheng asked. “That monster is still guarding the black pond.”

“We need to go back there. There's a way out.”

“There is?”

Lan Wangji nodded tersely. “There are maple leaves.”

“Right,” Wei Wuxian said, starting to perk up. “There are maple leaves in the pond but not the cave. That means there must be an exit at the bottom of the pond that connects to the water outside that the maple leaves are carried through.”

“And how do you propose we find that out? What if the entrance is too small or is a crack? And then there's the matter of the beast still being there,” Jin Zixuan pointed out.

“We've got to try,” Nie Huaisang said. “There's still a chance we can all get out of here without any more wounds than we already have.”

“Right. We'll just need to lure it away,” Wei Wuxian agreed. “Somehow.”

After a quick but harsh debate, it was decided that Jiang Cheng would be the one to go searching for the entrance underwater since he was the best swimmer among them. The Xuanwu was easily distracted by a thrown torch, the sound and heat getting its attention. Jiang Cheng quietly slipped into the water while it was distracted, sliding underwater and out of sight with barely a ripple. Nie Huaisang was impressed by his friend's abilities and made a mental note to compliment him the next time he saw the Jiang heir.

When Jiang Cheng returned, it was with good news. Nie Huaisang helped Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji keep the Xuanwu distracted while the others made their escape, swearing when the Xuanwu got in a lucky bite on Lan Wangji's already injured leg.

“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng called out.

“Go! Send someone back for us!” Nie Huaisang said as he and Wei Wuxian dragged Lan Wangji toward a smaller cave where the Xuanwu couldn't get them. “Jin Zixuan, use the messenger butterflies and send them to all the great sects for help! We'll be fine!”

Jin Zixuan waved once and then dragged a protesting Jiang Cheng into the water with him. Nie Huaisang breathed a sigh of relief when the three of them were settled in the cave.

“Well,” he said as Lan Wangji slumped against a wall and sank to the ground with Wei Wuxian's help, “that... that was a horrible experience.”

“That's putting it lightly,” Wei Wuxian said, looking down at Lan Wangji's leg with deep worry. “How are we going to deal with this? We only have those sachets of herbs with us.”

“Ah! That's where you're wrong.”

Wei Wuxian stared at Nie Huaisang like he'd grown three heads.

“What?”

Nie Huaisang glanced outside, noted the position of the Xuanwu (he grimaced when he saw that it was making a snack of Wen Chao's body), and then darted out to grab one of the arrows laying on the ground, his footsteps light and quick. He returned to the others, breaking off the sharp arrowhead from the shaft and then setting the latter aside.

“There are four sets of stitches in gold thread on the inside of both your sleeves,” he said, using the arrowhead to carefully cut through the threads in his own sleeves before taking off one of his boots, “and then one set on the inward-facing part of your left boot.”

The arrowhead made quick work of the threads in his boot before he tossed it to Wei Wuxian. Nie Huaisang paused, let the sudden influx of information that flowed through his mind with the releasing of the stitches settle, and then pulled his boot back on. A quick gesture saw a dagger materialize from the *qiankun* pocket there, and another had it disappearing again, only to be replaced by a regular bag containing a field kit of cleansing tonics, clean bandages, and other medical supplies.

“I told you these clothes were important,” Nie Huaisang said with a satisfied smirk. Wei Wuxian set to work taking care of Lan Wangji's wound, having him turn and cough up a mouthful of blood after pressing certain points on his back once he'd finished cleaning and binding his leg.

“Clever,” Lan Wangji managed. Nie Huaisang hummed.

“*Da-ge* says to be prepared for anything, so I did my best. I apologize I couldn't reveal things earlier, but I didn't want to show my hand too soon. Wuxian, we both have enough food and water for a week each, as well as more than enough medicine. And...”

Nie Huaisang made a sweeping gesture with his hands, calling forth the guqin he'd bought. “I know this isn't your preferred guqin, Lan-*xiong*, but it should still work wonders in your hands if needed. We'll have to get rid of the Xuanwu somehow once we're all strong enough.”

“That may take some time,” Wei Wuxian said as he pulled out a dried out hollow gourd that had been filled with clean water and then sealed again. He broke the seal and helped Lan Wangji drink some before setting it aside.

“We'll rest before we make plans,” Nie Huaisang agreed. “There are blankets in the sleeves as well, but nothing too fancy. They'll keep us warm, though, especially if we also have a fire going.”

“Great. I don't suppose you have anything else that'll help us get out of here?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Nie Huaisang shook his head. “Sorry. I didn't bring any ladders.”

“Pity. That would've been useful, though your sleeves would have needed to be much bigger.”

Wei Wuxian laughed as he draped a blanket over Lan Wangji's body. “Lan Zhan! You made a joke! Warn me next time.”

Nie Huaisang shook his head as the two of them began to converse, coming to rest a foot or so inside the entrance to the rest of the cavern and looking out. The Xuanwu of Slaughter was quiescent for now, but he knew the real battle for escape would begin soon enough. He sighed. The troubles that lay ahead loomed ever closer with each passing second, and it scared him to death.

Meet Me on the Battlefield

Chapter Notes

CW for alcohol, descriptions of a minor *qi*-deviation, and references to Mo Xuanyu's canonical suicide/self sacrifice

The crackling of the small fire they'd managed to cobble together with bits of dry brush and broken arrow shafts was soothing. Nie Huaisang refreshed the ward that got rid of the smoke and then checked in on his companions. Wei Wuxian was sleeping with his head tilted back against the wall, and Lan Wangji, who was *supposed* to be sleeping as well, was awake, the firelight glinting off his half-opened eyes. Nie Huaisang watched him stare at the flames for several minutes before he got to his feet.

“How are you doing?” he asked, moving around the fire and then coming to rest on Lan Wangji's other side. Nie Huaisang made sure to give him plenty of room, not wanting him to feel like he was being crowded. Lan Wangji sighed softly, not taking his attention off the fire.

“The Cloud Recesses have been burned. *Shufu* is badly injured, *xiongzhang* is missing. I...” Lan Wangji blew out a quiet breath and then shook his head, falling silent once more.

“You're allowed to worry, you know. I don't think there's a rule against it.”

“Do not grieve in excess,” Lan Wangji murmured. Nie Huaisang huffed.

“What about 'believe sincerely' and 'have courage and knowledge?’” he retorted. “You're not grieving in excess. You've barely begun to grieve. You're not wailing and weeping in the streets. You're allowed to mourn the *temporary* loss of your home. Besides, I firmly believe that your brother and uncle will be around for many, many years to come.”

“You can't know that.”

Nie Huaisang wanted to laugh but refrained, knowing it wouldn't help in the slightest.

“Lan-*xiong*, I may not know many things, but I'm always happy to learn new ones,” he said.

“And... I hold hope that this period of darkness will pass soon. I know wars- and make no mistake, that's what we're heading into -can take a long time to be resolved or can be over in a matter of days, and there's no way to tell which is which. But I choose to believe that we'll all survive this and come through it stronger. It might be overly optimistic, but I prefer that rather than believing we'll all fall under Wen Ruohan's sword. Besides, you and Wei Wuxian need to marry! You haven't even exchanged the first gifts yet. I think you'll like what he's going to give you. It's...” He waved an idle hand. “...not *quite* in the traditional form as most Nie betrothal gifts, but something tells me you'll like it anyways.”

Lan Wangji closed his eyes. “Whatever Wei Ying gives me will be perfect, even if it is not entirely traditional.”

"I'm sure he'll be happy to hear that." Nie Huaisang got up, stretching his limbs out one by one. "Sleep. I'll keep watch."

Lan Wangji let out a quiet hum and not long after was fast asleep. Nie Huaisang sat far enough away from the fire so that its warmth wouldn't lull him to sleep but close enough so that he could still see, his attention focused on the exit of the cave. He traded off with Lan Wangji when the latter woke at five in the morning, curling up under his own blanket and catching some much needed sleep. His golden core was strong enough this time around that he could manage some sleepless nights, but Nie Huaisang knew he'd have to be as well-rested as he could manage given the battle ahead.

When he woke, Lan Wangji was checking over the guqin while Wei Wuxian was eating. Nie Huaisang pushed himself up into a seated position, belatedly covering a yawn with a hand.

"How long was I asleep?"

Lan Wangji paused in his tuning, brow furrowing faintly before he answered. "Five hours. You should eat. We should all be as close to full strength as is possible if we're to fight the Xuanwu."

"How's your leg?"

"Tolerable. The medicine and bandages have helped, and Wei Ying has been giving me some spiritual energy to further assist with the healing."

"You'd do the same for me, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said cheerily. "Don't worry about it."

"Mn."

Nie Huaisang smiled and then went to a far corner of the cave to relieve himself, a quick obscuring ward providing some semblance of privacy. After cleansing his hands with a bit of spiritual energy, he returned to the now-dying fire and sat down to eat. The food wasn't particularly flavorful-emergency rations rarely were -but it was chosen for its longevity and ability to provide energy as needed.

"So," he said between bites, "what's the plan?"

"Well," Wei Wuxian said, leaning back on his palms, "there are plenty of arrows and bows out there. We could use them for something. Having the guqin will help. I think the best bet would be to try to attack it from within somehow. Its shell is pretty hard."

"One of us would have to go inside. But..." Nie Huaisang worked at a particularly tough bit of flatbread and then continued on once he'd chewed and swallowed. "I know the shell looks big, but do you think a person could actually fit inside? Regular tortoises and most snakes don't live in water, and yet this one does. You'd think it more a turtle than a snake-tortoise... *thing*. Either way, wouldn't its body get in the way?"

"Perhaps, but if it can retract its neck and head fully within its shell, then it has to be big enough for someone to go inside as well, right?" Wei Wuxian said.

"Do we have to go inside at all, though? We could lure it out. It liked the scent of fresh blood, right?"

“Well, yes, but I don't like where this is going.”

Nie Huaisang shook his head. “Adding blood to the water wouldn't be hard, and after that, we could lure it into a trap. And if it *is* anything at all like a tortoise, turtle, or a snake, the cold would make it slower, right?”

Lan Wangji frowned at the seeming non sequitur. “What do you mean?”

Nie Huaisang grinned and drew Lengfeng from his sleeve. He snapped it open and then, with a gentle push of spiritual energy, flicked it so a waft of chilly air was sent towards his companions.

“I can make the water near-freezing if necessary,” he boasted as Lan Wangji's eyes widened in surprise. “Lure the Xuanwu out of its shell and I can help slow it down. I don't think my other fan would be particularly helpful in such an enclosed space, however. I tend to overpower Dafeng in times of stress, and having such high winds in the midst of battle would not be a good thing- at least, not this time.”

“Definitely not,” Wei Wuxian agreed. “How do we want to lure it out, and how are we going to contain it?”

Nie Huaisang closed his fan, running his fingers lightly over the engravings on the metal guard. “Collecting the arrows and bows would be a good plan. If we can create some sort of net or snare with them, we could keep the Xuanwu in one place and kill it that way if we trap its head and neck.”

He put his fan away and then took out an unfinished *qiankun* bag from his sleeve, as well as some needle and specially prepared thread. Nie Huaisang began to finish the last bit of embroidery on the pouch that would see it turn from a regular bag into its enhanced version, the needle sliding in and out of the fabric easily.

“What are you doing?”

Nie Huaisang didn't look up at Lan Wangji's question, too intent on his work. “I'm finishing this *qiankun* bag,” he said. “Who knows what may be found inside the Xuanwu's shell? It's been around for so long that I'm sure there are more than just organs and human remains inside. Better to be careful and store it in a bag than carry it by hand, don't you think?”

He set the last few stitches, tied off the loose end of the thread, and then applied enough spiritual energy to the bag to activate it. The embroidery lit up with a satisfying blue-white flare before fading. Nie Huaisang tested it with a rock, storing and recalling it until he was happy with how things were working. He tossed the rock aside and then threw the pouch to Wei Wuxian.

“Why am I getting this?”

“Because Lan-xiong and I will have to be outside the tortoise,” Nie Huaisang said. “I'll be keeping the water cold, and he'll be there with his guqin. It won't be as effective if he's using it inside.”

“Wangji.”

Nie Huaisang blinked. “What?”

“We will be family soon enough. You can call me Wangji,” Lan Wangji said, though he looked faintly uncomfortable even suggesting it.

Nie Huaisang smiled warmly. “Thank you, Wangji-*xiong*. You, of course, can call me Huaisang.”

Wei Wuxian beamed at the two of them, looking far too happy for their current situation. Nie Huaisang didn't comment, knowing how pleased his brother was that two of his favorite people were getting along so well.

“Anyways,” he continued on, “that's why you're getting the pouch, Wei-*di*. We'll have to make a trap for the Xuanwu before anything else, though, so we'll need the bows, arrows, and any swords that may have been left behind, if any.”

“What are you thinking?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“A variant of a drag noose trap,” Nie Huaisang said, sketching out his idea on the dirt in front of him. “It's sort of similar to one you'd use to catch small game like rabbits on a running trail, but fixed in one place.”

He drew what looked like a spider's web, the center left open in a round shape. “If we anchor the rope to the right points, the Xuanwu will be able to get its head through but not pull it back out. The rope should tighten around it in a slip-knot and then hold it fast. If we move fast enough and the cold water keeps it sluggish, we should hopefully be able to pin it in place and move around it so it can't bite us while we take care of exterminating it.”

Wei Wuxian looked at the diagram thoughtfully. “It could work,” he agreed, “but getting that set up without the Xuanwu noticing will be tricky.”

“I brought *both* my fans with me, Wei Wuxian.”

Wei Wuxian brightened up considerably before laughing. “Didn't *da-ge* tell you never to do that again?”

“Ah, no, he said never to do it again where *he* could see it,” Nie Huaisang retorted with a smirk. “And he's not here right now, is he?”

That set Wei Wuxian off into delighted peals of laughter, though the faint rumbles coming from the main cave as the Xuanwu reacted to the noise had him going quiet quickly.

“Would someone explain what is going on?” Lan Wangji asked in a surprisingly patient manner.

“I can ride my fans like a sword,” Nie Huaisang explained, “one for each foot. It may look a little silly, but it works nonetheless. *Da-ge* banned me from doing it where he could see it because I may have fallen off once or twice-”

“-Try ten or more!-” Wei Wuxian interjected.

“-before I'd mastered it,” Nie Huaisang finished with a roll of his eyes. “Regardless of how long it took me to do that, it'll help us get the strings fixed where they need to be. I just hope it'll actually work and the Xuanwu won't mess everything up.”

“We'll find out soon enough,” Lan Wangji said. “I propose a temporary mind link since we won't be able to hear Wei Ying while he is inside the shell.”

“Ah. Um, you two go ahead with that,” Nie Huaisang demurred. “There's no use having all three of us in the link. It would just get confusing.”

That, and he had no wish to accidentally give himself away should his thoughts get the better of him.

“You don't want to see into my mind, A-Sang?” Wei Wuxian asked, nudging him with an elbow.

“Wei Wuxian, your mind is a chaotic, brilliant mess, much like your room back home,” Nie Huaisang said dryly. “I...” He looked over at Lan Wangji. “What do you think, Wangji-xiong? Would three people strain the link too much?”

Lan Wangji considered it and then shook his head. “No, it should not. It would just be a surface one. Enough for us to consciously speak to one another without sharing deeper thoughts or emotions.”

Nie Huaisang took in a deep breath, let it out slowly, and then nodded. “Whatever might be said or thought in this cave doesn't leave it, alright?”

“What, you think we'd think the worst of you simply because of your thoughts?” Wei Wuxian asked. His tone was teasing and light, but his brow was furrowed with gentle worry.

“You never know,” Nie Huaisang said cryptically, ignoring the confused looks sent his way.

The three of them set out to collect whatever weapons they could find, making several stealthy trips back and forth from their hideaway to the main cave until they'd managed to get as much as possible, including the abandoned lengths of rope from the entrance to the cave. Nie Huaisang flew up to the top of the slope to see if he could move any of the rocks safely so they didn't have to fight the Xuanwu, but none of the ones he could get to were able to be moved by one person on their own, cultivator or not. They dismantled the bows for their strings and tied most of the arrows into bundles, though enough of the arrowheads were salvaged and then strengthened with a small array to ensure they were strong enough to bite into the rock and hold as anchor points.

Huaisang helped to direct the placement of the ropes, thanking any and all higher powers that might've been watching over them that the ropes that had been used for climbing were long enough to do what was needed. Once everything was in place, the three of them imbued the trap with spiritual power in a joint effort so it would be strong enough to hold up to the Xuanwu's struggles. After the three-way mental link was active, Lan Wangji got into place with his guqin, the instrument floating in front of him with his hands at the ready.

Ready? Nie Huaisang asked over the link.

Ready, Wei Wuxian confirmed. He steeled himself and then, dagger in hand, cautiously crept into the Xuanwu's shell.

Nie Huaisang crouched near the water's edge, directing his spiritual energy steadily through Lengfeng and chilling the water as much as he could without draining himself. The effect wouldn't spread very far, not with how big the pool was, but the immediate area around the Xuanwu would hopefully be enough to work.

You two are very lucky to be outside, Wei Wuxian grumbled. ***It reeks of death and decay in here. This shell is massive; much larger than it looks to be from the outside. If it was cleaned out, it***

could be a house! I- Oh!

Wei Ying, what's wrong? Lan Wangji asked, tensing immediately.

The Xuanwu not only feasts on human flesh, but it also digests spiritual energy, Wei Wuxian said, sounding disgusted.

Like the Yin Iron, Lan Wangji mused.

That's worrisome, Nie Huaisang said with a frown. *Be on your guard, Wei Wuxian. We don't know what else may be in there.*

I'm fine for n- Wei Wuxian broke off with a sharp gasp, his mental voice going shaky. ***Oh gods. I found- There's a sword here. It's radiating resentful energy. This must be what's trapping the Xuanwu here.***

Leave it and get out of there now, Nie Huaisang commanded. *Or, if you must bring it, put it in the pouch.*

Good idea. I- Oh shit!

Nie Huaisang and Lan Wangji watched the shell start to rock violently, and no amount of pleading from them garnered any response from Wei Wuxian. They barely got a split-second of warning before the Xuanwu's head burst from its shell, Wei Wuxian clinging desperately to a pitch-black sword that was jammed into the underside of its mouth. Lan Wangji played several harsh chords on the guqin, drawing its attention. The Xuanwu snapped its head sharply, sending Wei Wuxian and the sword flying back towards the bank.

Nie Huaisang dragged his brother under the web of ropes and out of harm's way as quickly as he could, swearing all the while. The Xuanwu refocused on Lan Wangji as the source of its continuing pain, its head shooting forward. It hit an outer edge of the trap the first few times, but when it found the larger opening in the middle, it took that route. Ropes tightened harshly around its neck, trapping it in place. It screeched, jaws snapping ineffectually as it tried to back out of its entanglement.

A few of the lesser anchor points snapped away from the wall, but the larger ones held, the imbued ropes creaking and straining against the weight and motion of the Xuanwu. Nie Huaisang left Wei Wuxian where he was for the time being and drew Lengfeng once more, sending blast after blast of carefully sculpted freezing air towards the monster while Lan Wangji switched to a more lethal set of melodies. The Xuanwu slowly stopped struggling, its head beginning to droop under the combined assaults, until it was all but motionless.

Wei Wuxian struggled to his feet, sword in hand, and spat out a mouthful of blood. “Do we chop its head off or strangle it?”

Nie Huaisang caught his breath, his energy flagging as he considered the question. “Slice its throat and bleed it out,” he managed. Lan Wangji kept playing, the song shifting to one meant to bind and hold. Wei Wuxian started toward the Xuanwu, staggered, and then went down to one knee with a pained groan.

“Wei Ying!”

“Wuxian!”

Nie Huaisang hurried over to his brother, looking him over until he found a dark spot that was growing steadily on Wei Wuxian's left side. “You're hurt!”

“It, uh, it grazed me?”

“That doesn't look like a graze! You were bit!” Nie Huaisang said. “Here, let me just-”

He fed enough spiritual energy into Wei Wuxian to help slow the bleeding and then dragged him back to Lan Wangji to look after.

“Give me the sword,” Nie Huaisang demanded. It took the combined efforts of all three of them to prise Wei Wuxian's fingers away from the hilt, and when he lost contact with it, he passed out. Nie Huaisang gritted his teeth, picked up the sword, and stalked over to the Xuanwu. The resentful energy coming from the sword was overwhelming as it poured over him, but Nie Huaisang fought against it long enough to score a series of deep wounds across the Xuanwu's neck, its dark blood flowing into the water and making it murky.

Nie Huaisang's vision began to go curiously red-tinted, his eyes stinging. He raised his free hand to wipe away the sudden warm liquid he felt running down his cheeks. He didn't remember beginning to cry. How odd. When he lifted his hand to look at the liquid, his world tilted and his chest constricted as if a snake was wrapped around it.

Ah. Blood. That was... worrying. Pain radiated sharply through his body from several points, and as Nie Huaisang sank to his knees, he realized what was happening. A *qi* deviation, though nowhere near as bad as Nie Mingjue's final one had been.

Nie Huaisang coughed out a mouthful of blood, the liquid spraying out over the ground in front of him. If this was a fraction of what his brother had felt as he was dying, it was little wonder Nie Mingjue had come back as a fierce corpse. Nie Huaisang managed to relinquish his grasp on the sword as his world went black, the faint clatter of metal against stone and familiar shouts in the distance following him into the cold of the void.

Wen Qing walked beside her brother as they made their way down one of the back roads towards Qinghe and the Unclean Realm, the hems of their plainly colored and designed robes streaked with dust and dirt. Their sword scabbards were wrapped in leather strips to keep them from being recognized, though to be fair, neither of them were as intricate as say, Lan Wangji's or Jin Zixuan's. Better safe than sorry, though, so the leather wrapping was necessary for the time being.

They'd been traveling for several days now, escaping in the aftermath of the night hunt gone horribly wrong. Leaving in the dead of night was never fun, but Wen Ning had packed several *qiankun* bags full of necessary supplies that wouldn't be missed, as well as changes of clothes, food, blankets, and two oilskins that could be used to make a makeshift shelter as needed. He'd taken care of that while she was off on the night hunt, knowing they'd have to leave sooner rather than later, and since no one really paid all that much attention to him even now, he was able to get what he needed without anyone asking questions.

Wen Ruohan had taken the news of Wen Chao poorly, to say the least. Wen Qing had managed to escape quite a bit of scrutiny, especially since the surviving Wen soldiers had corroborated her story

of how Wen Chao had been killed. Wang Lingjiao had tried to blame the whole thing on Wei Wuxian, but Wen Qing had quickly slapped her down hard. It helped to be an actual member of the clan rather than just a desperate hanger on at times, as Wen Ruohan had believed her over Wang Lingjiao and sent his son's now former mistress away from him with an impatient command.

“*Jiejie*, what do you think will happen now?” Wen Ning asked.

“We'll go to the Unclean Realm as planned and plead our case,” Wen Qing said. She glanced upward for any sign of the Wen Dire Owl and then continued on. “We may have to change our last name for the course of the war, but that shouldn't be too hard. Not *Nie*, though. Perhaps Wei Wuxian would let us borrow his last name temporarily.”

Wen Ning hummed in agreement. “He likely would. You know him; he's always happy to have more family, even now.”

“Of course.” Wen Qing went quiet for a moment, fingers running over the leather on her scabbard. “I don't know if they'll have A-Yuan to call their own again, but-” She stopped, head cocking to one side before she quickly shoved Wen Ning off the road and into the waist-high grass beyond.

“What-”

“Horses, coming up fast,” Wen Qing hissed, going into a crouch. “Get down, A-Ning.”

Wen Ning crouched down beside her, the grass doing an admirable job of hiding them both. The siblings watched in tense silence as the cloud of dust and the thunder of hooves that heralded the riders' approach came closer and closer until they were passing by. Wen Qing searched for any sign of Wen livery, letting out a sigh of relief when she didn't see any.

That sigh turned into a muted gasp when Wen Ning suddenly left their hiding place and called out after the riders, waving his arms to get their attention. “*Jiang- xiong ! Jin- xiong !*”

“Wen Ning, what are you *doing* ?” Wen Qing asked, quickly stepping out of the grass as well so she didn't leave her brother alone. This was *not* part of the plan at all. Two of the riders split off from the group and came back toward them, resolving into the familiar shapes of Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan as they drew nearer.

“Wen Ning? Wen Qing? What are you two doing here?” Jiang Cheng asked, brow furrowed in confusion.

“It's a long story,” Wen Qing said, cutting off anything her brother might've been about to say. “Where are you going?”

“Meeting up with *Nie- zongzhu* ,” Jin Zixuan said. “I- *Wen- guniang* , you're a doctor, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then come with us. We'll surely need your skills.”

Wen Qing arched an eyebrow at him. “You still haven't explained where we're going.”

“Where do you think?” Jiang Cheng asked. “Back to Dusk Creek Mountain. We're getting Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji out of that damn cave if it kills us. *Nie -zongzhu* and some of his people went on ahead of us.”

“We'll have to share horses,” Wen Qing said after exchanging a glance with her brother.

Jin Zixuan nodded and then called out to Mianmian and another Jin disciple to join them. They were off again shortly afterward, and none too soon. Their party reached the now-unblocked entrance to the Xuanwu's cave just as an unconscious and bleeding Nie Huaisang was being carried out by his brother. Wei Wuxian was already laid out on a blanket, Lan Wangji feeding him spiritual energy in a steady stream that was nonetheless starting to flag.

Wen Qing slid off her horse before Mianmian brought it to a halt, Wen Ning following her example not long after. “Go to Wei Wuxian,” she told him after a quick visual triage of the scene. “I'll take care of Nie-*gongzi*.”

Wen Ning didn't hesitate, but he did give Nie Huaisang a deeply worried look before he went to tend to Wei Wuxian. Wen Qing hurried over to where Nie Mingjue was ever so carefully setting his brother down on another blanket, pulling out the bag of emergency medical supplies she carried in her sleeve as she went.

“Nie-*zongzhu*! I can help him.”

Nie Mingjue looked up at the sound of her voice, his eyebrows rising in sharp surprise before he nodded. “Wen-*yisheng*, what can I do to help?”

“She's a Wen? Nie-*zongzhu*, are you sure that's wise?” one of the Nie disciples asked worriedly. Nie Mingjue waved her concerns off.

“She's of the Dafan Wen, as is her brother. That branch of the Wen are farmers and doctors. I have no quarrel with them,” he said. “Any help would be welcome right now.”

Wen Qing's estimation of the Nie leader rose sharply at that moment. They'd never really interacted in the prior timeline given everything that had happened, but she'd heard tell of his honorable nature from many people. She knelt down beside Nie Huaisang, giving him a once-over before taking one of his wrists in hand and sending a careful probe of spiritual energy through his meridians. She frowned, and then sat back, mind moving quickly.

“He's suffered a mild *qi*-deviation,” she said, “brought on by something drenched in resentful energy. I'm assuming this is his first one?”

“Yes. He-” Nie Mingjue knelt down on the other side of Nie Huaisang, picking up his hand and enfolding it in both of his own. “He's never had one before. He doesn't cultivate the saber like most Nie, which has helped immensely.”

“Good. That means he'll recover quickly. It'll be better if he's awake, though he'll be in pain. How is he with acupuncture or pain medicines?”

Nie Mingjue huffed out a quiet laugh as Wen Qing set to work sending spiritual energy through Nie Huaisang to clear out just enough of the lingering resentful energy to allow him to wake. “It depends on the dosage,” he said. “He speaks his mind freely, though he has little trouble doing that even without the pain medication.”

Wen Qing smiled. “Ah, yes. I assume he's more freely affectionate too?”

“Yes, though we'd never let anyone ridicule him for that,” Nie Mingjue said firmly.

“Good. He'll be waking up shortly. I'll use my needles for now, but once we get him and Wei Wuxian stable, we'll need to move them somewhere safer. They'll need to be cleaned up as well.”

Wen Qing slid needles into three separate pain relief points, the tiny *qi*-infused markings engraved on the needles making sure they were sterile and sharp no matter how many times they were used. Nie Huaisang's eyes fluttered a few times before he managed to open them halfway. He blinked sluggishly and then rolled his head so he could focus on his brother.

“*Da-ge*! You're here!”

“Of course I am,” Nie Mingjue replied. “Where else would I be?”

“At home? Wh-” Nie Huaisang's eyes widened. “Where's A-Ying? And Wangji?”

“Over there.” Nie Mingjue inclined his head toward them. “Wen-*gongzi* is taking care of them.”

Nie Huaisang turned his head to see better, but stopped when he saw Wen Qing blocking his way. “Wen Qing! What are you- Are you safe?”

“Of course I am,” Wen Qing said briskly. “Your brother is here, is he not?”

Nie Huaisang grinned, the expression loose and happy. “He is. *Da-ge* is the *best*. He's like you!”

“Oh?”

“All spiky like a porcupine on the outside but soft on the inside.” Nie Huaisang hummed. “Is it dead?”

Wen Qing was mildly confused at the sudden change in subject, but Nie Mingjue seemed to know what his brother meant.

“Yes. You trapped it well,” he said. “We have some people staying with it just to make sure.”

“Good. And-” Nie Huaisang lowered his voice as much as he could manage. “And the sword?”

“Contained.”

Nie Huaisang relaxed at that, breathing out a sigh of relief. “It was horrible. I-” His bright smile returned when Wen Ning came over to speak with his sister. “Wen Ning!”

Wen Qing rose to her feet, brushing her robes off. “A-Ning. How is Wei Wuxian?”

“He'll need plenty of rest,” he said. “Lan-*xiong* says he was bit by the Xuanwu. The wound will need to be cleaned and stitched properly, but even with the supplies we have, I don't think we have what we need to help him entirely.”

“Stay here with Nie-*gongzi*,” Wen Qing said. “I'll go check him over. Nie-*zongzhu*, we'll need to go somewhere safe and quickly. I don't want any of them to get infected.”

“We can fly back to Qinghe. They *tried* to set up a supervisory office there, but Wen-*zongzhu* is lacking in good help these days.” Nie Mingjue smirked. “A pity, I'm sure.”

“Flying it is. Your brother can be moved as he is; the needles won't come out unless I will it,” Wen Qing told him. “I'll look over Wei Wuxian and then we'll go from there. I don't know what you're going to do with Jiang-gongzi and Jin-gongzi, but I doubt it's safe for them to be away from their sects at the moment.”

Nie Mingjue nodded and looked down at his brother, who was staring at Wen Ning with a deeply fond smile. “Alright, Huaisang, you feel up to moving?”

“Wh- I guess? Do I have to walk?”

Nie Mingjue laughed and then picked him up, cradling him in his arms. “No, I'll be carrying you.”

“Oh, okay. Hey, *da-ge*. *Da-ge*, *da-ge*, guess what?”

“What?”

Nie Huaisang rested his head against Nie Mingjue's shoulder with a happy sigh. “Wen Ning is *really* nice! And *handsome*.”

Wen Qing had to turn away to hide the laughter that threatened to spill out of her at Nie Huaisang's uninhibited babble and her brother's corresponding deep blush. She hadn't expected the pain relief to hit him *that* hard, but each patient reacted differently to the treatment. Nie Huaisang was surprisingly lightweight, that was all. She shook her head in amusement as she made her way over to where Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were sitting, intent on checking the former over to make sure he was travel-ready.

“I need to go back to Gusu, Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji was saying. “I need to find *xiongzhang* and *shufu* before it's too late.”

“You can come back to Qinghe long enough to have the doctors check you over, though,” Wei Wuxian argued. “Your leg is still healing, after all, even with the medicine we gave you. How are you supposed to help them if you walk even *more* on that leg and mess it up? It'll take several days to get to Gusu from here!”

“He's right, you know,” Wen Qing said, crossing her arms over her chest. “I'll look at that after I look at Wei Wuxian and then we'll see how well you can travel, Lan-*er-gongzi*.”

Lan Wangji subsided long enough for Wen Qing to check Wei Wuxian over, watching her every movement with intense concern. Wen Qing made sure her examination was quick but thorough, her deft hands checking over the bandages that were covering the wound on Wei Wuxian's side as well as those on his hands from the sword. As usual, Wen Ning's work was as good as her own when it came to bandaging, so she was satisfied that Wei Wuxian wouldn't be in danger of bleeding out or any more infection than he'd already sustained.

Wen Qing moved on to look at Lan Wangji's leg, giving him a pointed look at the wince he didn't manage to hide as she unwrapped the old bandages and checked the status of the wound. “You're healing but more rest won't hurt,” she said as she applied a fresh layer of medicinal salve and then clean bandages. “You'll only slow the healing down if you try walking on it too much, even with your high level of cultivation.”

“See?” Wei Wuxian said as Nie Mingjue came over to check on them. “You should definitely come back to Qinghe with us, Lan Zhan.”

“You should,” Nie Mingjue agreed, idly adjusting Nie Huaisang's now-slumbering weight in his arms. “Your brother is there and-”

“*Xiongzhang* is there?”

Nie Mingjue nodded. “Yes. Our scouts found him running from the Recesses and brought him back to heal. Your uncle and those disciples and teachers who made it to the Cold Cave are still at the Recesses, but rebuilding it will take time.”

Lan Wangji slumped against Wei Wuxian, the least composed Wen Qing had ever seen him in either timeline. “Then... if *xiongzhang* is there... I will go to Qinghe. But only long enough to heal fully. I won't be left out of the fight.”

“Of course not,” Nie Mingjue agreed easily. “That would be a waste of talent and a sword. But I'm also not going to have you hurt yourself by not allowing yourself to heal with proper care, either.” He turned to Wen Qing. “Can he fly by sword or would a horse be better?”

Wen Qing rose to her feet as she thought it over. “He's strong enough to handle riding a sword, but we'll have to take rest breaks,” she decided. “Wei Wuxian would do better on a horse, but something tells me he'll be too stubborn for one.”

“He can ride with me,” Jiang Cheng offered, “or, I guess, take a sword with someone who has one.”

“Sword,” Wei Wuxian said immediately.

“Still plenty of rests, and if you start to bleed again, you're going on a horse,” Wen Qing told him firmly.

“We'll take the horses back to Qinghe,” Mianmian said, bowing to Nie Mingjue. “Thank you, Nie-zongzhu, for their use.”

“You're welcome. We'll get your swords back soon, I promise,” Nie Mingjue said. “It may take some time, however.”

With their travel plans decided, the group returned to Qinghe and the Unclean Realm, with the Wen siblings going via sword with two of the Nie disciples who were willing to take them. It took a few hours with the rest stops to get to their destination, but soon the three injured men were ensconced in the infirmary. Wen Qing retrieved her needles from Nie Huaisang, activating the sterilization engravings before putting them away.

Nie Mingjue requested that she and Wen Ning join him in his office, sending Nie Yang to make sure they got there safely. He was standing at a map-covered table with Meng Yao, Lan Xichen, and Nie Zonghui when they arrived, and from what Wen Qing could see, it was of Qishan and, more specifically, the area around where the indoctrination camp had been held on the outskirts of the Nightless City. Nie Mingjue sent Nie Yang off with a nod of thanks before waving the two of them over.

“You two know the area best,” he said. “Where would the swords that were taken be stored?”

Wen Ning looked over the map and then tapped a particular outbuilding. “Here. The whole area is lightly guarded now that it's not really being used again. It's usually for grand ceremonies or, in the case of the guards, punishment duty to run up and down the stairs of the grand staircase or sweep

them. I saw them taking the swords here, and they weren't very good about locking it or keeping an eye on the door even while the indoctrination was going on. The guards there like to drink, but no one really complains unless they do something stupid.”

“Then a small force could go in, get the swords, and get back out relatively easily,” Lan Xichen mused.

Wen Ning nodded. “To be honest, I could probably go in and get the guards to go away for long enough to get the swords. I don't think they'll have heard of *jiejie* and me leaving yet. It's only been a few days, and we left in the middle of the night. The servants think we went looking for ingredients only found then. We do it often enough that no one would think it odd for us to be gone until it's too late.”

“Or so we hope,” Wen Qing added, “but yes, a small force could easily go in and get them. No offense, Lan-*zongzhu*, but it'd be best if your disciples stay behind or find some different clothing to wear. They're not exactly inconspicuous regardless of the time of day the raid may take place.”

Lan Xichen chuckled, covering his amusement with a hand. “Ah, yes. You're right, though it may be rather intimidating, in that case.”

“We'll figure out who's going when later,” Nie Mingjue said. “If you don't mind, Wen-*yisheng*, Wen-*gongzi*, could you tell us as much as you know about Wen Ruohan's plans for the future?”

“We will gladly work with you until the end of the war, Nie-*zongzhu*,” Wen Qing said, “in return for the protection of the Dafan Wen. We may have to look to Wen Ruohan as our sect leader, but it doesn't mean we follow his every word or belief, not like many of the Qishan Wen.”

“I'll have my people draw up the agreement,” Nie Mingjue said.

“And Gusu Lan will witness and sign it as well,” Lan Xichen added. “If we can get Lanling Jin and Yunmeng Jiang to add their names and support, then we shall do so. For now, though, you'll have to make do with our two sects.”

Wen Qing smiled and then bowed, Wen Ning following her example. “For now, that will have to do. Come, A-Ning, let's give these gentlemen what they want.”

Nie Mingjue was looking over the information Wen Ning and Wen Qing had provided two days after the recovery of Nie Huaisang, Lan Wangji, and Wei Wuxian, matching what they knew with what had happened in the prior timeline around this time in the war. It was difficult to keep what he knew hidden from the others who were ignorant of the time travel, but so much had changed that he wasn't sure if what he knew would even hold up much longer. With Wen Zhuliu and Wen Chao dead, Lotus Pier would likely never be attacked as heavily as it had been, and Jiang Cheng, Jiang Fengmian, and Yu Ziyuan would never lose their golden cores and, in the case of the latter two, die in part because of it.

He sat back, scrubbing a weary hand over his face. His mind was full of what ifs and futures now lost. Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan had returned to their fathers with the official requests to join in the fight against the Qishan Wen, as well as protection for the Dafan Wen who may be living in their territories. He had little doubt that Jin Guangshan would ignore that request, and made a mental

note to have Wen Qing and Wen Ning send letters to their relatives in Lanling, if any were there, to have them temporarily go to Gusu or Yunmeng.

Nie Mingjue shook his head and was about to pack everything away so he could go to bed for the night when the door to his office slid open, admitting Nie Huaisang. His brother swept into the office, shutting the door behind him almost as if it was an afterthought. Nie Huaisang had recovered well from his experiences in the cave, the care he'd received from Wen Qing and the doctors in the Unclean Realm seeing him well on his way to full health once more.

“*Da-ge*, I need to talk to you, and you need to sit and listen,” Nie Huaisang announced. Nie Mingjue activated the privacy wards on the room and then waited, knowing very little could stop his brother when he was like this. “I’m not going to stay behind and wait for you and the others to come back from the war like last time. The clan elders can take care of running things here. I’m not going to wait around and paint fans or chase birds when I *know* I can help you this time. Otherwise, what’s the point of me cultivating a stronger core in the first place?”

“Huaisang-”

“No, don’t-” Nie Huaisang jabbed his closed fan in Nie Mingjue’s general direction as he paced a tight circuit in front of his desk. “Quiet, I’m talking. Furthermore, with everything that’s changed, we *need* all the hands we can get on the battlefield. You’ve got Nie Zonghui at your side this time, too, and Meng Yao, so you don’t even need me as a tactician or an administrator. I can work with the people on the ground, maybe do some scouting or actual fighting. I haven’t set up a spy network quite yet, but I’m working on it and Wen Ning says-”

“*Huaisang*.”

Nie Huaisang froze, too used to hearing the low, insistent tone Nie Mingjue spoke his name in as a prelude to something worse. Nie Mingjue shook his head with an amused smile.

“I’m not going to hold you back.”

“Of course you’re not; I’d just- Wait, what?”

Nie Mingjue got to his feet, stretching away the aches that came from sitting for too long in one spot.

“I’m not going to hold you back from the fighting,” he repeated, coming around from behind his desk. “I’d prefer if you didn’t get yourself killed, obviously, but you’re right, this time around is different. I’m not as worried about your cultivation or martial training. Of course, we’ve yet to get your sword back, but Wen Ning assures me it won’t be that hard to do. He’ll be taking a small group of fighters with him to retrieve them within the next few days.”

It was funny to see the way Nie Huaisang deflated, looking like a puffed-up cat that had suddenly had a bucket of water thrown over it.

“Oh. Well, in that case, I guess I’ll just... go to bed.”

“Wait a minute. Before you go, I’d like your opinion on something.”

Nie Huaisang watched him with an intrigued look as Nie Mingjue fetched a lacquered box from a cabinet and then set it on his desk. He turned it so it was facing Nie Huaisang and then opened it,

revealing its contents to his brother. Nestled within on a length of soft cloth were three flat jade dragon tokens, each about two inches in both height and width. A real pearl was set under each of the coiled dragons' chins, though they were of different colors. One had a pale blue-white pearl, the second, a deep gray, and the third a warm golden one.

"Hm. They're beautiful, and I can guess who gets which one, but a golden pearl? Isn't that a little... *obvious*?" Nie Huaisang asked.

"If Jin Guangshan can't be bothered to see the worth of his children, recognized or not, then that's on him," Nie Mingjue said firmly. "And if it happens to tweak his nose when he sees it hanging from Meng Yao's belt, then so much the better."

Nie Huaisang was quiet for a long moment, his face a mask of studied indifference. Nie Mingjue *hated* it when his brother was like that, as it was a harsh reminder of the years they'd spent apart and the person Nie Huaisang had become in order to see the truth brought to light.

"Far be it from me to question your judgment when it comes to your heart, *da-ge*, but are you sure about this?" Nie Huaisang asked eventually, looking up from the tokens. "I know Meng Yao is... *different* now, but I still worry. We both know what he's capable of if broken enough. I spent far too long chasing the truth and-" He laughed, the sound devoid of any humor. "I know what it feels like to let revenge and self-interest be the driving forces in one's life. I may have gone about it a different way than Jin Guangyao, but in the end, we were two sides of the same coin. It was only through luck and the suicidal desperation of a near-stranger that I was the one who managed to come out ahead."

It hurt Nie Mingjue's heart to hear his brother speak of himself like that, even if it was technically true. He'd had the feeling for a long time that Nie Huaisang hadn't told him everything that had happened between the time he'd died and the time they'd been reunited. Hell, all Nie Huaisang had told him about the minutes before he'd conducted the ritual was that he'd gotten old and wanted to see Nie Mingjue one last time. He'd never said just *how* old he'd been.

Nie Mingjue frowned and then guided Nie Huaisang over to a low table in the corner of the room, gesturing for him to sit down. While Nie Huaisang got comfortable, Nie Mingjue fetched a pair of wine cups and a bottle of Tiger's Fang, one of the rice wines local to Qinghe. He poured them each a cup once he'd sat down, figuring they'd need the alcohol as a bit of a social lubricant for the conversation they clearly needed to have.

"Remind me how old you were when you did the ritual?" he asked, wasting no time in starting his questions. "I know you said it was a while after Wei Wuxian returned and Jin Guangyao was found out, but..."

Nie Huaisang stared at the wine in his cup before throwing it back like it was nothing more than weak tea. "I was almost sixty-five. I'd spent... Well. Far too long without you, to be frank. I wanted to see you one last time, and if the ritual didn't work, then it would've been better to die at peace than of illness or a *qi* deviation. I hadn't been Sect leader for a while at that point. I'd handed it off to..." He tipped his head back, thinking. "Nie Zhaohui. He's not born yet, so you've never met him. He was a third cousin. Nie Zonghui's nephew."

Nie Mingjue sat back as he digested that. "You were older than *fugui* when he died," he said somberly. Nie Huaisang nodded while he poured himself a second cup of wine.

“And you, and many of the other Nie leaders because of the damn saber issue,” Nie Huaisang agreed bitterly, “which we *still* haven't done a lot of research on, by the way.”

“I think that can wait until after the war,” Nie Mingjue said, starting on his first cup of wine. “We still have plenty of time.”

“You died before your thirtieth birthday,” Nie Huaisang retorted. “Excuse me if I want to see you live for far longer than that. Who knows, you could be the first Nie to cultivate to immortality.”

“You seem to be the one more likely to do that, Huaisang.” Nie Mingjue sipped at his wine, enjoying the bold taste. “But I certainly wouldn't mind seeing what the future is like. Not sure about the immortality, but if I had some good friends and maybe some family with me, it could be worth it.”

He watched Nie Huaisang finish off his cup and pour himself another before he pulled the jar away. “Save some for me. I only have the one jar.”

“I can always get more. Something tells me we're going to need it if you keep asking questions like that,” Nie Huaisang said. Nie Mingjue shrugged.

“If you want. Just make sure to bring some pain medicine for tomorrow,” he said. Nie Huaisang eyed him warily and then got up, leaving the office only to return a few minutes later with two more jars of alcohol. He set them down on the table, resuming his seat in a sprawl that looked more like something Wei Wuxian would perform.

“I assume you have other questions?”

“Only if you're willing to answer them.”

Nie Huaisang sighed. “You've waited this long. I'm surprised you've been so patient. Go on; ask away.”

Nie Mingjue mulled over what he wanted to ask and then decided to start with something simple. “Did you ever marry?”

“No. I...” Nie Huaisang rubbed a hand over his mouth and then picked up his cup again. “I was more focused on keeping the sect afloat those first few years, and once I mostly had that managed, I turned my attention to solving your murder. Wen Ning was there after Wei Wuxian returned- he'd been held captive by the Jin for all that time in one of their dungeons and had only escaped the night Wei Wuxian came back -and he...”

Nie Huaisang's expression softened, a smile curving his lips as he looked back at the past through wine-tinted sight. “He traveled a lot those first few years he was free. He turned up in Qinghe from time to time, and as the years went, he stayed around more and more. Our friendship grew during that time. I made sure he knew he had a home here if he wanted it, no strings or expectations attached. He was one of the few people who could distance what I'd done in my drive to get you justice from all the other things I'd done in my life. He saw me for me, in all my good and bad, and didn't shy away from it. We'd both been hurt deeply by the war and what came after, and that seemed as good a starting point as any to renew our acquaintance.”

“When did you realize you loved him?” Nie Mingjue asked as he poured the last of the wine in the open jar into his cup and then set the jar aside.

“Hm. Do you know, I'm not sure? It wasn't really any grand revelation. I guess I just realized one day that my life was emptier and quieter without him, even if he's never been as loud a presence as, say, Wei Wuxian or Jiang Cheng,” Nie Huaisang mused. “He started coming here more and more after my fortieth birthday.”

He chuckled. “We figured out after that party that while he could drink wine as a fierce corpse, he couldn't get drunk. He'd drink for the flavor more than anything else. I think he said that the resentful energy within him sort of... *vanished* whatever he ate or drank since he couldn't, you know, get rid of it the regular way.”

“Useful.”

“Mm. There were times I wished I could have the same talent, especially as I got older.”

Nie Huaisang idly swirled his wine in his cup, far past caring about propriety at that point. Nie Mingjue nodded, the wine starting to set up a pleasant buzz in his blood. Had either of them cared to, they could've used their golden cores to mitigate the effects of the alcohol and been perfectly sober within a minute or so, but the hushed hour of the day they were experiencing was a liminal space, cradling them in the silvery haze of moonlight through rice paper and the camaraderie of shared blood and secrets.

The night dragged on as they exchanged questions and answers and drained the wine. Nie Mingjue found himself feeling hazy and warm, his guard lowered considerably. He knew vaguely that the two of them should get to bed soon, that they had things to do in the coming morning, but he also knew that he needed to tell Nie Huaisang something vitally important before all of that.

“Hey... Hey, A-Sang,” he mumbled, scooting around the table so he was within arm's reach of his brother.

“Huh? What?”

“Love you.” Nie Mingjue held out one arm in an open invitation. “Can I... Can I have a hug? Please?”

Nie Huaisang smiled blearily at him and then closed the gap, leaning in against Nie Mingjue in a boneless motion. Nie Mingjue didn't bother to stop the happy noise that left him at the feeling of his brother's warm weight against his side, too relaxed by the alcohol and late hour to worry about saving face. Besides, it was *Nie Huaisang*. If there was anyone in the world he could be so casual with, it was his own little brother.

“You're the best *da-ge*,” Nie Huaisang told him, half-muffled against his shoulder. Nie Mingjue laughed, low and amused.

“I'm your only *da-ge*. You're the best *didi*.”

“What about Wei Wuxian?”

“Ah, he's my *shidi*,” Nie Mingjue pointed out. “You're my only *didi*.”

“Good... Good point.” Nie Huaisang let out a gusty sigh. “We're gonna have to go to bed soon, huh?”

“If we want to be good in the morning, yes.”

“I say we take the day off,” Nie Huaisang suggested. “Skip the whole war, even.”

Nie Mingjue pressed a quick kiss against the top of his brother's head, wishing the same thing even if he didn't say it aloud.

“You know why we can't,” he said instead, nudging Nie Huaisang up to a seated position once more and unwrapping his arm from around his waist. “Up. And take your pain medicine with some water before you sleep.”

Nie Huaisang grumpily got to his feet, reminding Nie Mingjue of when the two of them were far younger and times were simpler.

“Mother hen.”

“Little chick,” Nie Mingjue retorted with a fond laugh, standing up as well. He dropped Nie Huaisang off at his quarters, deciding to deal with the empty wine jars the next morning, and then went to his own bed.

The memory of that night and the temporary lifting of the weight of the history both forged and lost between them felt distant and cold as the war raged around them several months later. The Wen had attacked Lotus Pier ten days after Nie Huaisang and the others had been rescued from the cave, though it had been a low captain who had led the charge rather than Wang Lingjiao. Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu had survived but not without sustaining serious injuries. Jiang Cheng had been acting as the leader of the Jiang troops on the battleground while his parents recovered back in the battered but still standing Lotus Pier under the care of some of the best doctors in the area.

The confiscated swords had been recovered and returned to their owners, allowing them to join in with the fight against the Wen. Nie Mingjue had kept his promise to Nie Huaisang, allowing him to be on the battlefield with the other young heirs of the cultivation world. He found it both frightening and astounding to see the ferocity with which his brother fought with both sword and fan, switching between his weapons with a dancer's grace.

At the moment, there was a lull in the battle and he and Nie Huaisang were in the command tent in the base camp, looking over the Nie scouts' reports and comparing them with those of the Lan, Jiang, and Jin. Jin Guangshan had personally stayed out of the war, allowing Jin Zixuan only a small amount of fighters to accompany him to the front lines. It was a clear sign that the Jin leader cared little for the rest of the world if his gilded nest was kept safe, but his son felt decidedly different about the whole thing.

Jin Zixuan was still awkward and lacking in a lot of social skills, but behind that pretty face lay a surprisingly keen mind with a bent towards cartography and tactics, two things that were very useful in their given situation. He and Meng Yao were deep in conversation about the best routes for their troops to take- the half-brothers were still warming up to one another, but it was clear Jin Zixuan was happy to finally meet someone who was related to him by blood that *didn't* want to undermine his position in any way -when Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian burst into the tent. Well, Wei Wuxian did; Lan Wangji entered with all the grace a Lan could have when on a battlefield.

“*Da-*” Wei Wuxian paused and then corrected himself when he saw the company Nie Mingjue was keeping- which, among other sect leaders, included Lan Xichen - “I mean, Nie-*zongzhu*, may we have a word with you in private? And Lan-*zongzhu* as well?”

Nie Mingjue exchanged a quick look with Lan Xichen and then gestured for their brothers to join them in an alcove of the tent. One quick privacy ward later and Wei Wuxian was off.

“So, I was thinking. Wen Qing said that Wen-*zongzhu* can only create the puppets but not fully control them because he only has three of the four pieces of Yin Iron, right?”

“Right,” Nie Mingjue said slowly, not liking where this was going. His fears were proven to be correct when Wei Wuxian pulled a *qiankun* pouch off his belt and held it up.

“I, uh, I may have been able to manipulate the sword I found in the cave of the Xuanwu?” he said, and then frowned. “It was strange, actually. It seemed all too happy to change its shape, even without a forge.”

Lan Xichen looked to his brother for explanation.

“Wei Ying has made a weapon to fight against Wen-*zongzhu*,” Lan Wangji said. “He believes he will be able to manipulate the resentful energy to, if not stop the puppets completely, then to distract Wen Ruohan enough to bring him out of his den.”

“Do you know how *dangerous* that is?” Nie Mingjue growled, taking a deep breath in and letting it out slowly when Baxia rattled in her stand across the room. Nie Huaisang looked over from his perusal of the map, eyes wide as he tried to figure out what was going on.

“*Da-ge*, it's only to be used when we get to the Nightless City, I promise,” Wei Wuxian said.

“And how are you planning on manipulating the energy?” Lan Xichen asked, placing a calming hand on Nie Mingjue's forearm.

“With musical cultivation,” Lan Wangji supplied. “Wei Ying cannot play the guqin, but he can play the dizi. I will play *Cleansing* for him after any use of the Amulet.”

“Amulet?”

Wei Wuxian nodded and then opened the pouch, drawing out its contents. Nie Mingjue swallowed back bile at the sight of the Stygian Tiger Amulet floating menacingly over his brother's palm, his stomach roiling. He'd hoped never to see it again in his life after the last time, but not all wishes came true.

“Put it back,” he ground out. “And Wei Wuxian-”

“Yes?”

Nie Mingjue waited until the amulet was sealed up again before continuing on, breathing a little easier now that it was out of sight.

“You'll get one chance with that... *thing*. If it doesn't work, that's it, no more. I won't have you be driven mad or die because of it. I've already lost enough family to Wen Ruohan. I'm not losing you too.”

As Wei Wuxian nodded, Nie Mingjue looked up to see Nie Huaisang watching with a pain-filled expression. A silent accord sprang to life between them at that moment:

No matter what, the Stygian Tiger Amulet would not claim Wei Wuxian's life. Not again.

Where Iron Meets Flesh (We'll Take it All)

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay on this chapter; it fought me like nothing else. But yay! The war is over and we can finally fully diverge from canon! *blows noisemaker*

Warnings for mentions of non-graphic descriptions of the effects of laxatives/emetics in one section of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wen Ning was *exhausted*. It was times like this that he almost missed being a fierce corpse that didn't need to sleep and which had a near-inexhaustible amount of strength. He and Nie Huaisang were creeping through the underbrush in the woods near a Wen supply outpost near the Hejian front, both dressed in simple but dark clothing that couldn't tie them to any particular sect. If caught, the plan was for them to say they were rogue cultivators wandering the outskirts of the Hejian area, chasing rumors of a resentful spirit plaguing the area.

The only light they dared to use was that of the full moon overhead, not wanting to draw more attention to themselves than was needed. Their shoes and clothes were laden with sound muffling arrays embroidered into the cloth to avoid any rustling noises beyond that which a native animal might make. The specialized garb was the work of the tailors and craftspeople in the Unclean Realm, made specifically for the Nie scouts.

After the war began in earnest, Nie Huaisang and Wen Ning had started their main work as scouts, eventually earning the titles of the Ghosts of Qinghe from the other scouts due to their ability to sneak past enemy lines without garnering any attention. Wen Ning didn't mind the misconception that he was from Qinghe; the fact that it firmly placed him in association with the Nie sect- and therefore his sister -was just an added layer of security that would hopefully see them surviving the war and far beyond. Wen Qing was making a name for herself as a battlefield doctor, working in the infirmary tent on the Nie front lines with her usual high quality and efficiency.

The efficacy of their scouting was greatly helped by the foreknowledge of the Wen troop movements they had, but with all the changes that had been wrought over the years to the Wens, they couldn't rely entirely on that information any longer, so scouting was still greatly needed. Both carried smaller variants of the message journal in their *qiankun* sleeves, the thin books allowing them to send real-time reports back to the base camp. The journals had been tweaked to let them write without needing ink, relying instead on spiritual energy that could change the pigment on the page with the speed of thought or wipe it clean with the same swiftness.

Wen Ning reached out and tapped Nie Huaisang on the shoulder. "Should we make camp?" he murmured. "Or should we keep going?"

Nie Huaisang looked up at the position of the moon, his face briefly limned in pale silver-blue light and gaining a ethereal cast.

“The moon is starting to get very low,” he said. “Sleep sounds *amazing* to me, if I'm honest. We're likely not going to make much more progress tonight.”

After some searching, they found a group of trees that were close enough together and shielded by enough tall brush and thickets that they were able to clear an area and set up their oilskins as a makeshift shelter. Some carefully arranged brush and branches to hide them in a hidden bower of their own and a proximity ward to let them know if anything meaning them harm was approaching later and they were ready to get some sleep. Nie Huaisang sent a message back to base camp to let them know they were stopping for the night before curling up against Wen Ning, his back against the former's front as they huddled under a blanket together.

It was the easiest way for them to fit somewhat comfortably together, and it let them stay warmer, especially as the weather began to turn colder. Wen Ning draped an arm over Nie Huaisang's waist, his chin hooked loosely over his shoulder. It may have been a more intimate position than most would likely have assumed, but neither of them minded. They were well past the awkwardness of sharing such close quarters- they had been for years, even if only their siblings knew it -and just existed in the quiet comfort that only a loved one could bring, friend or otherwise.

What sleep they managed to get that night, while not entirely comfortable or fully restorative, was nonetheless safe. They woke to the morning chorus of birds a few hours after dawn. Nie Huaisang turned over, burying his face against Wen Ning's shoulder with a groan.

“Too early,” he grumbled.

Wen Ning chuckled quietly and patted him on the back. “I know. We should eat something and then move on. We'll need to get to the Wen camp near Gao Ridge before the evening.”

Nie Huaisang made a noise like a disgruntled cat but disentangled himself from Wen Ning regardless. They dismantled their shelter after eating breakfast. Wen Ning was more than ready for food beyond trail rations, but that would have to wait until they got back to the Nie base camp. After checking in via their journals, the two of them continued on with their journey, making their way through the back country until they reached their goal just before sundown.

An overgrown dip at the top of the ridge gave them a relatively protected place to observe the Wen camp below unseen, allowing them to hide themselves in the tall grass and brush while they did their best to count the amount of troops and get a somewhat accurate map of the camp. The command tent was the easiest to find since it was the largest in the camp, and the time they'd arrived meant they were able to see where the mess tent and sleeping areas were. Nie Huaisang had his palm flat on his open journal, a steady stream of spiritual energy feeding into the pages and sending what he was seeing back to the Nie base camp.

When darkness truly fell and the moon was high overhead, they snuck in to the mess tent and tampered with the food stored there, lacing it with herbs and tonics that would cause all kinds of gastrointestinal distress and hopefully keep the Wen troops from moving forward with their plans for attack in the next few days. Wen Ning did feel somewhat bad for causing the members of his clan harm, but it *was* war after all, and if it gave an edge to the Nie troops and allowed them to capture the camp and those within it without much resistance, then so much the better.

The darkness covered their escape and return journey to their former hiding place, Wen Ning breathing a sigh of relief only when they were firmly past any of the night watchers and being deathly quiet wasn't as vitally important. The chill of the long night and the collecting dew made

their clothes heavy and cold as time passed. They took turns keeping watch, catching cat-naps as they huddled together under the protection of the long grass.

As sunrise came and the sky was painted in pale pinks and vibrant golds, Wen Ning reluctantly woke Nie Huaisang from where he was curled up against his side and then checked his journal to find that Nie Mingjue had sent one of his usual succinct notes:

Six li away. Let us know when the guards change after breakfast.

Wen Ning showed it to Nie Huaisang, who nodded and then took some food out to eat while they waited for breakfast to be over with and the shift change to happen. Wen Ning followed his example, knowing that he'd need the energy in the coming fight.

“Do you think this will change anything?”

Wen Ning considered the question. It was a good one. This camp had proved to be one of the more important ones in the prior timeline, but there was no telling if that was still the truth now.

“I think,” he said after finishing the piece of beef jerky he'd been working on, “that it'll make a difference, even if it's a small one. The less fighters on the field, the better, and since they'll be taken and held well away from Nightless City, Wen-zongzhu can't use them in his fight when we finally close in on him. We may not have Meng Yao playing spy for us this time around, but I think that's countered by our foreknowledge, for the most part. And we have *jiejie*'s informants in the city as well, so that has to be worth something.”

Nie Huaisang frowned but otherwise held his tongue, only moving when the shift change happened and he had to send back a report to his brother. The herbs and tonics they'd used kicked into full effect a half hour after the shift change, with several of the watch-people finding the nearest cover of a bush or out of the way tree clump to try and relieve their discomfort. Wen Ning and Nie Huaisang slipped away down the ridge when they saw similar things happening in the camp, though some clearly had a mix of unpleasant reactions that had the two young men wincing in sympathy for them.

The rest of the Nie battle party met up with them half a *li* outside of the camp. There was a quick pause for them to mount the horses that had been brought along for them and then the group was under way once more, splitting into two sections to completely surround the camp. Nie Mingjue led the charge, such as it was, with Nie Huaisang and Wen Ning close at his back. Securing the victory was relatively easy, even if some of the less haggard looking combatants did their best to fight back.

Once the Wen leader was secured, the command tent was raided for any useful information, be that regarding troop movements, supply chains, or other minutiae vital to the Wen war effort. Wen Ning did his best to ignore the cries of 'traitor' and other less savory names when some of the Wen soldiers recognized him, even with his current nondescript attire and hairstyle. He ducked into the command tent simply to get out of sight, shoulders slumping once he was away from prying eyes. A heavy but comforting hand landing on his shoulder had him looking up to find Nie Mingjue standing next to him with a small but encouraging smile.

“Oh! Nie-zongzhu. I didn't mean to interrupt you,” Wen Ning apologized. Nie Mingjue shook his head.

“You didn't. We're just about done here anyways,” he said, squeezing Wen Ning's shoulder before letting his hand fall away. “Ignore those idiots out there if you can. You're no traitor. You're working for the good of the whole cultivation world, not just one clan.”

“*Da-ge* is right, you know,” Nie Huaisang added as he swept into the tent, Nie Zonghui at his side. “You shouldn't listen to them. They're idiots, and you *know* how I feel about idiots.”

Nie Zonghui hid a quick smile before saluting Nie Mingjue. “Nie-*zongzhu*, all the enemy combatants have been rounded up and are ready for transport. As requested, the doctors and other medical staff have been put in a separate group.” He cleared his throat. “How, uh, how long are the effects of what Nie-*gongzi* and Wen-*gongzi* put in the food supposed to last?”

“Depending on the dosage and the weight of the person on question...” Wen Ning tilted his head thoughtfully. “They should be ready to be moved within an hour or so. They certainly won't be happy about it, nor will they be particularly fast, but they'll live nonetheless.”

“I'm half-tempted to drag them all to Lanling to let their smell foul up Koi Tower, but it's best if we get them back to the secure camp in Qinghe,” Nie Mingjue said with a wry chuckle. “Good work, you two. We couldn't have done it without you.”

“We're just happy to do our parts,” Nie Huaisang said, slinging an arm around Wen Ning's shoulders the best he could given their height difference, “even if it *did* mean having to deal with one of the smelliest enemy camps in all of China.”

Wen Ning laughed as he leaned in against Nie Huaisang, grateful for the support of his friend. He could live with a few nasty names thrown his way if he continued to have others on his side, and he hoped that support would continue for years to come.

The final battle at Nightless City came both far too soon and not soon enough in Nie Huaisang's opinion. The only saving grace was that his brother hadn't been captured and wasn't at the mercy of Wen Ruohan during the height of the battle. He'd heard stories about how chaotic and overwhelming the battle had been, but to experience it for himself blew those tales out of the water handily. He and Wen Ning fought back-to-back as much as was possible, carving a deadly swath through the fierce corpses and puppets that Wen Ruohan had sent out against them.

Nie Huaisang found himself using his sword for the most part given the close quarters, though he did use Dafeng to batter back the encroaching horde from time to time. He could feel his spiritual energy beginning to flag sharply but clenched his teeth and kept fighting the best he could, ignoring the ache of his arms and the blood that ran from several wounds on his person.

“We can't do this much longer!” Wen Ning called out. “We'll have to retreat soon!”

“I know!” Nie Huaisang said as he yanked his sword out of a now hopefully completely dead fierce corpse. “I-”

The eerie wail of a dizi sounded high over the cacophony of the battle, the sound accompanied by thick plumes of resentful energy that sought out the puppets and fierce corpses and turned them against one another. Nie Huaisang turned to see Wei Wuxian standing high above the battle on the head of a great winged beast's statue, his flute at his lips and resentful energy coiling around him as he played.

“We've got to get up there! We can't leave him alone,” Wen Ning insisted.

Nie Huaisang nodded once and then sent Yaotou into his *qiankun* sleeve along with its scabbard. He felt bad about not cleaning his weapon beforehand, but there would always be time for that later. He drew out Lengfeng in Yaotou's place, planted his feet firmly on the ground, and then brought his two fans sharply together with a loud crash of metal against metal and a blaze of spiritual energy. As he pulled them apart, a whirlwind of frosty wind blasted forth from between them and cleared a path across the battlefield.

Enemies in its path were blown violently aside while allies who were still alive merely had their hair and robes ruffled gently. Nie Huaisang staggered and then went to his knees as his energy drained out of him in a rush. Wen Ning didn't allow him a moment to rest, scooping him up in his arms in one smooth motion once he'd banished his own sword and then leaping through the air with a *qi*-assisted jump. They landed halfway up the flight of stairs, and were close enough to see the moment when Wen Ruohan dragged Wei Wuxian down from his perch and into his waiting hands.

Nie Huaisang pushed out of Wen Ning's arms when he saw how his brother was bleeding heavily from the eyes, ears, and nose, Wei Wuxian's body trembling from the overwhelming amount of resentful energy he'd been directing through it and his flute. Wen Ning held Nie Huaisang steady as they continued on up the stairs, but a flash of dark gray and slate blue had them pausing before they could reach the top. They weren't close enough to hear what Wen Ruohan was saying to Wei Wuxian, but they were certainly close enough to see Meng Yao thrust his sword deep into the Wen leader's torso and then pull it out again with a sharp and squelching yank.

Wen Ruohan swayed and then fell to the ground just as Lan Wangji caught the now-unconscious Wei Wuxian in his arms. Meng Yao banished the blood off his sword with one neat flick of his wrist, looking only faintly perturbed that he'd just ruthlessly killed a man. Wen Ning passed Nie Huaisang off to him, all but shoving him into Meng Yao's arms before going to check on Wei Wuxian.

Nie Huaisang could hardly complain, though, as he approved of making sure Wei Wuxian would survive. He scrounged up enough strength to pull an empty *qiankun* pouch off his belt and draw the Seal into it, sealing it up so it couldn't be used against anyone and then tying the pouch back onto his belt. Nie Huaisang sat down on the top step well away from Wen Ruohan's body, watching as the remaining enemies were handily mopped up by the other fighters. Meng Yao sank heavily down on the step next to him, his face pale and eyes wide.

“If you're going to throw up,” Nie Huaisang said tiredly, “do it on the side I'm not on, please.”

Meng Yao let out a startled laugh, a bit of color returning to his cheeks the longer he sat. “I can't believe that worked.”

“We were lucky,” Nie Huaisang said, leaning in against him and resting his head against Meng Yao's shoulder. “The war can end and we can all rest for a time. I'm going to sleep for a *week*.”

“Just a week?” Meng Yao teased. Nie Huaisang laughed tiredly as Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen hurried up the stairs, followed shortly after by Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng.

“*Da-ge*, come to join the stair party?” Nie Huaisang asked, not bothering to straighten up from his current slumped position.

Nie Mingjue took in the scene before him, sighed heavily, and then shook his head. "If you're able to make jokes at a time like this, I know you'll be okay," he said. "Xichen, one of us will need to get the pieces of Yin Iron before someone gets the bright idea of stealing off with them. Huaisang--"

"The Tiger Seal is taken care of," Nie Huaisang assured him. "Go. We'll hold until the doctors and medics get here."

"I'm going to get Wei Wuxian to the healing hall," Wen Ning said.

"Put him in a private room," Nie Mingjue directed, "one with only one entrance. I don't want anyone getting *ideas*."

"Do you think that a possibility?" Jin Zixuan asked.

"Jin-gongzi, no offense, but most of the people I would trust right now with my *shidi* are up here," Nie Mingjue told him bluntly. "People will likely see Wei Wuxian's talents with resentful energy as a path to more power. The Stygian Tiger Seal will be destroyed once we are able to do so safely, just as the Yin Iron pieces will be."

Jin Zixuan frowned faintly before seeming to come to a decision and bowing to Nie Mingjue, sword clasped between his hands. "Of course, Nie-zongzhu. I'll tell my people not to disturb him."

"Thank you."

Nie Mingjue accompanied Wen Ning and Lan Wangji to the healing hall, leaving the others on the steps. Lan Xichen glanced up at the cloud-laden sky, noting the leaden color of the clouds.

"We'd best start getting things organized," he said. "It looks like snow soon, and I don't want to leave our dead unattended, especially those Wen Ruohan controlled."

"What should we do with him?" Jiang Cheng asked, looking over at Wen Ruohan's corpse with a scowl.

"Even though he was our greatest enemy, he should be treated with a little respect," Nie Huaisang said with a sigh. "If we mistreat his corpse, we're no better than he was. Bury him with his people with the appropriate rites and no one can say we didn't try." He huffed out a humorless laugh. "But wrapping him in a shroud laden with containment arrays probably wouldn't hurt, either."

Lan Xichen nodded at that, though Nie Huaisang did notice the faintly curious cast to his expression. It took a moment for Nie Huaisang to realize why, and when it hit him, he nearly winced. Someone his age shouldn't be so intimately aware of the political ramifications of how enemies of war should be treated after death. It was something a sect leader or adult twice his age would likely think about, not a sixteen year old. Oh, well. Too late now, he supposed.

Nie Huaisang struggled to his feet, giving Jin Zixuan a small nod when the other man reached out and placed a steadying hand under his elbow.

"Since *da-ge* is busy with Wei Wuxian, I'm going to go collect what remain of the Nie forces and get them working," he said. "Yao-ge, would you come with me?"

"Of course. Someone has to look after you, after all."

Nie Huaisang nodded, paused, and then did something that had the others watching him with surprised expressions. He retrieved his oilskin from his *qiankun* sleeve, draped it over Wen Ruohan's body to shield it from sight and the elements until it could be properly handled, and then bowed in respect before starting to make his way down the stairs. It was a small thing, and he doubted it would do anything to settle Wen Ruohan's spirit, but it was better than nothing.

By the time Nie Mingjue returned from the healing halls- Wen Qing and her fellow doctors, who had been waiting in a protected camp a few hundred yards from the entrance to the Nightless City, had swept in to tend to the wounded and dying -the combined forces of the four Great Sects were hard at work clearing the battlefield, making sure the fallen were set aside in areas marked for their particular sect. Nie Huaisang and Meng Yao were working right alongside the Nie disciples, even if both looked worn to the bone while doing so. Nie Mingjue shrugged, tied back his sleeves, and pitched in.

None of the Nie disciples blinked an eyelid at their sect leader working alongside them to help clear the battlefield, but the same couldn't be said regarding the other disciples, though the Lans hid it better. Nie Mingjue hid a smirk when he saw Jin Zixuan watch him for a long moment, brow furrowed, and then roll back his own sleeves in preparation to start helping as well. He had to give it to the Jin heir; at least he was willing to learn and actually put in the work, unlike *some* of the Jin Nie Mingjue could name.

Jin Guangshan showed up with 'reinforcements' well after all the hard work was done, sweeping in like he'd personally slain Wen Ruohan and the majority of the Wen army himself. What few Wen soldiers and civilians that had survived had been evacuated well before Jin Guangshan arrived, with the soldiers going to a heavily guarded camp in the wilds of Qinghe while the civilians were taken via wagon toward Yunmeng since Gusu was the furthest away from the battlefield. Nie Mingjue wasn't about to allow Jin Guangshan or Jin Zixun the so-called pleasure of killing innocents, unlike last time.

He did worry about the Wen that had been captured closer to Lanling near Langya, doubting that Jin Guangshan was treating them with the basic dignity and rights they deserved, but that could be handled once everything was settled. He sent out a few scouts that way just in case, wanting to get an early look at the situation before it truly devolved into mass murder. He would have sent Shao Hai along with them to keep him out of the way of Meng Yao, but the former captain had managed to get himself killed in battle when he'd overreached and tried to take on multiple fierce corpses at once. He may have been a good training captain at one point, but he'd been just as brash and foolhardy on the battlefield as he'd been on the training grounds the day he'd gotten demoted.

Nie Mingjue shook his head and pulled himself out of his thoughts as he reached the throne room where he, Lan Xichen, Jiang Fengmian, and Jin Guangshan were meeting. It had been three days since the final battle and they were still debating over what to do with the Yin Iron. Jin Guangshan wanted to study it, but both Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue were of the mind that it needed to be destroyed. Nie Mingjue favored the idea of dropping the *qiankun* pouch the pieces were in into an active but remote volcano, especially since the area seemed rife with them, as the intense heat would surely destroy the wretched things without too much trouble and it shouldn't cause any monsters to spawn from their temporary presence.

Jin Guangshan insisted they wait until Jiang Fengmian was able to join them, something that, on the surface, seemed a good thing, but Nie Mingjue had his suspicions that Jin Guangshan was

trying to delay the destruction of the Yin Iron until he could get his hands on at least one of the pieces. It was lucky, then, that the *qiankun* pouch containing the Iron had been well-hidden by Lan Xichen during the chaos after the final battle, not to mention warded so heavily that Lan Xichen would know if anyone came within ten feet of its hiding place.

Jiang Fengmian looked well, having almost entirely recovered from the severe injuries he'd received during the attack on Lotus Pier. The four of them took seats at a hastily sourced table well away from the ominous throne that dominated the room, the heavy doors kept closed in deference to the freezing snow and wind that had swept in over the past few days. Nie Mingjue was glad for his heavier robes and the environmental arrays woven into it; Nie Huaisang had grumbled about his scouting robes not having them, but the environmental arrays would've interfered with the silencing ones, so he and Wen Ning had had to deal with the temporary discomfort when away from base camp.

Jiang Fengmian had brought fresh tea leaves with him, something that had been in short supply in the Nie camp toward the end of the war. It wasn't the lotus-based tea Yunmeng was famous for, but rather a spicier and more hearty blend that Nie Mingjue recognized as one the Meishan Yu favored. Nie Mingjue was grateful for that, as the tea lent itself well to the colder weather. Once the pleasantries were exchanged and the first round of tea enjoyed, the real discussion began.

"So. The Yin Iron," Jiang Fengmian said as he set down his cup. "My son has told me of its effects and how Wen Ruohan used it against our people. Such a thing..." He shook his head. "It was sealed away before by esteemed members of our sects, and we can see how well that worked. Destroying them certainly seems like the best method of getting rid of them once and for all. Having another Wen Ruohan in who knows how long of a time could spell disaster for the world as we know it. We were lucky that he didn't cause more damage than what he managed."

"If they're destroyed, then we lose the chance for research," Jin Guangshan countered.

"Research? What use could we have to research them?" Nie Mingjue asked, brow furrowed heavily. "They're dangerous pieces of corrupt magics. They have no further use but to be destroyed."

"Pretty words coming from someone who has a disciple who used a piece of Yin Iron himself," Jin Guangshan retorted. Nie Mingjue knew the comment was meant to anger him and more than likely prove he wasn't entirely capable of making rational decisions, due to the infamous Nie anger issues, but he'd been expecting such a question and wasn't about to give Jin Guangshan the satisfaction of baiting him to anger.

"That piece of Yin Iron will be destroyed as soon as the doctors are able to determine how that destruction could affect Wei Wuxian. I won't have him further hurt or worse in our zeal to see the world rid of that evil," he said, taking a pointedly calm drink of his tea once he'd finished speaking. "The other pieces aren't tied to anyone at the moment, so they can be destroyed easily enough. We have plenty of volcanoes at our disposal around here; I highly doubt the Yin Iron could stand up to one. It'd be easy enough to test. Just drop one piece in and see how it goes. We'd have to have representatives from all four Great Sects there, of course, so no one can say anyone tried to keep the pieces for themselves."

Lan Xichen nodded in agreement. "A solid plan, and the sooner it's carried out, the better. Jiang-zongzhu, I apologize for asking this, but would you be well enough to act as the Jiang representative, or should we see if Jiang-gongzi can once more stand in your place?"

Jiang Fengmian waved off the apology. “No need to apologize. I appreciate your concern, but I'm more than well enough to oversee this. My son has performed more than admirably in my stead, but it's time I take over for him once more.”

Nie Mingjue wondered if Jiang Fengmian had ever actually *told* Jiang Cheng that he was proud of him, and could only hope that the fact that Wei Wuxian hadn't split the Jiang sect leader's focus this time around meant that he'd actually praised his son. He made the mental note to tell Jiang Cheng he'd done well regardless, even if it would likely get little more than a faintly baffled thank you in the end.

Jin Guangshan looked like he'd bitten into a particularly sour kumquat, clearly having expected Jiang Fengmian to back him up given the ties between their two sects. He recovered with a modicum of grace, agreeing, albeit reluctantly, to the immediate destruction of the Yin Iron and the eventual destruction of the Stygian Tiger Seal. For safety reasons, Nie Mingjue had made sure the Seal was stored well away from where the other pieces of Yin Iron had been hidden, not wanting to tempt fate and have someone discover and then steal all of them away in one fell swoop.

After Lan Xichen recovered the *qiankun* pouch containing the Yin Iron from its hiding place, the four Clan leaders, their heirs, and their second in commands went to one of the smaller volcanoes that was in an isolated area but not so far away from Qishan that they couldn't get back easily. Everyone watched with great unease as Lan Xichen drew one of the pieces out of the pouch and threw it unceremoniously into the volcano, maneuvering his sword swiftly away in case things went wrong.

Much to the relief of the watchers, the piece of Yin Iron sank into the molten magma without protest. A thick plume of resentful energy boiled upwards after a few minutes, the magma below roiling and bursting in protest before falling back down again. It was decided to go slowly out of caution and toss the remaining Yin Iron in piece by piece. Nie Mingjue watched as Lan Xichen did his slow but methodical work, fascinated by the fact that the Iron was actually melting. He knew enough about forging to know that iron needed very high temperatures to melt and wasn't entirely sure the magma was hot enough, but the Yin Iron had never acted like regular metal before, so why start now?

When the last piece had been disposed of, the observers returned to the Nightless City and dispersed for the time being, though they would meet up again in force the next night for the celebratory feast. Nie Mingjue had contemplated asking Lan Xichen and Meng Yao to be his sworn brothers again, but he'd decided against it, hoping the ties of courtship and eventually marriage would prove stronger than the brotherhood they'd had in the prior timeline. He had yet to bring up the idea of the courtship to them, wanting to get through the war first before complicating matters even further.

He made his way to the healing hall, stopping at the bedside of every Nie combatant who was there and checking in on them before going to the area where Wei Wuxian's private room was. He nodded to the guards on duty, making a mental note to get them to swap out soon if at all possible, and then entered the room. Wei Wuxian lay still on the bed, his face having regained a little color since the last time Nie Mingjue had seen him.

Nie Mingjue took a seat next to Wei Wuxian's bedside, settling heavily onto the low stool there. He took Baxia off his back and then set the sword to lean against a table so it was within reach but not making him uncomfortable. It took some time for Wei Wuxian to rouse, but when he did, it was with a whole-body jerk that made Nie Mingjue think he hadn't expected to survive what he'd done.

“You know, A-Ying,” he said, unable to hide the roughness in his voice brought on by a sudden swell of relief and sadness, “you don't have to prove to anyone that you're a Nie in all but blood in such a fucking *stupid* way.”

Wei Wuxian slowly turned his head. The movement looked like it was taking all his strength to accomplish, something that Nie Mingjue hated to see.

“Wh- what?”

Nie Mingjue held up a hand to stop his brother from straining his voice. It already sounded like Wei Wuxian had eaten a handful of gravel and obsidian; Nie Mingjue had no desire to piss off the doctors more than they already were due to the younger man's condition. He helped Wei Wuxian sit up halfway, making sure the pillow was behind his back so he was comfortable.

“Your use of that weapon of yours drove you to a near-fatal *qi*-deviation,” he said, not bothering to mince his words as he poured a cup of water for Wei Wuxian and pressed it against his lips. He ignored the tears he could feel beginning to collect at the corners of his eyes as he watched Wei Wuxian drink, his pain at seeing someone he loved hurting breaking his heart. “Luckily, the doctors were able to save you. Wen Ning had to all but drag his sister out of here before she fell over with exhaustion. You'll live, but it's going to take a while to recover.”

“And the Tiger Seal?”

“How attached is it to your core?”

“Uh... I don't know? I only ever used it the once, so probably not that badly?”

Nie Mingjue huffed sharply and brushed his free hand across his face, trying to wipe away the moisture there. “Idiot. Once we know, we're going to find a way to either destroy or neutralize it like the other three pieces of Yin Iron have been destroyed. I won't have anyone using it against another person, including against you. It was a weapon of war, but it doesn't need to stay around for any longer now that the war's over.”

“It's done?” Wei Wuxian tried to push himself up further, but given he had the strength of a newborn kitten at the moment, he didn't get much further than he had the first time around. “What happened? *Da-ge*, tell me!”

Nie Mingjue reached out and brushed a wayward lock of hair out of Wei Wuxian's face. “While you... *distracted* ...Wen Ruohan, Meng Yao managed to sneak up behind him and put a sword through several vital organs. He and the rest of the Wen dead have been buried with the appropriate cleansing and suppression rituals.”

“Wen Ning? Wen Qing? Are they safe?”

“The Dafan Wens who've survived are safe in Lotus Pier, the Cloud Recesses, or back at home. Wen Qing and Wen Ning are here, of course, but no one can say they were ever on Wen Ruohan's side. Anyone who tries will have to go through quite a few people, myself and Huaisang included. We've made it clear that only the mainline Wen soldiers had anything to do with Wen Ruohan, even if they didn't have much choice about it at times.”

“And Huaisang?”

Nie Mingjue tilted his head toward the entrance of the room where Nie Huaisang was just visible outside, stubbornly sitting on a stool of his own with Yaotou unsheathed and braced across his lap. He looked about ready to fall over from exhaustion, but he'd insisted on playing guard while Wei Wuxian was unable to defend himself. Wen Ning was leaning against the other side of the doorway, his own sword in hand, though it was sheathed at the moment. He looked as equally tired and stubborn as Nie Huaisang, an unusually stony glare landing on anyone who tried to get in to the room who wasn't permitted.

"They've been switching out who your guards are on their own, though Huaisang has been there pretty much since you arrived. The only reason Lan Wangji isn't here is because his brother needed him for something. I'm sure he'll be back soon to play Cleansing for you again."

Wei Wuxian nodded, looking pleased to see his betrothed soon. "How long've I been out?"

"Almost four days. The doctors said you needed the rest. They're having a celebration tomorrow for the end of the war. We were worried you might not make it. Whether you get to go is dependent on what the doctors say."

"If it's a banquet, all I'll need to do is dress up and sit in the Nie section," Wei Wuxian said dismissively. "I'll be fine, I promise."

"That'll be for me to decide."

Wen Qing stepped through the doorway after sending her brother and Nie Huaisang off to go get some sleep. Their places were taken by Nie Zonghui and Lan Qiyue. Lan Qiyue was one of the fiercest Lan warriors Nie Mingjue had ever met, and he approved greatly of Wen Qing's choice in replacement guards if their brothers couldn't be there. Nie Mingjue stepped back to Wen Qing access to Wei Wuxian, giving her a quick once-over with the practiced eye of an older brother. They may be roughly the same age, but he wasn't about to let her run herself into the ground either.

Wen Qing took hold of Wei Wuxian's wrist, her gaze going a little distant as she let her spiritual energy flow slow and steady through his meridian to assess the state of his golden core. She set his hand down after a couple of minutes and stepped back with a contemplative expression.

"You can go to the banquet, but *only* if you promise not to make or get into trouble," she said.

"You'll sit at one of the Lan or Nie tables and be the very portrait of a model citizen or I *swear* I will stick you so full of needles you won't be able to move for a *week*."

"As long as I stay be Lan Zhan, I'll be fine," Wei Wuxian swore. "But I can't ensure that others will play nicely."

"I don't expect world peace, but--"

"*Jiejie!*"

Wen Ning and Nie Huaisang burst back into the room, Lan Wangji following them with a puzzled expression and his guqin across his back. Nie Huaisang was leaving a trail of snow and dark mud as he went; the left side of his robes up to just above his knee was soaked with the latter. His left hand was only marginally cleaner, a streak of mud clinging to the back of his hand and under his fingernails.

"What the- Nie *Huaisang!*" Wen Qing snapped. "You're making a mess of my infirmary!"

“It's important, *jiejie*!” Wen Ning insisted. “We were going to the hot springs to relax a little before sleeping when Huaisang-*xiong* slipped on a wet patch and half-fell into one of the mud pools.”

“I was going to go clean up, but then I saw something you had to see,” Nie Huaisang added. He thrust out his muddy hand. “Look!”

Wen Qing warily approached him, clearly not wanting to get dirty herself, and looked down at his hand. Nie Mingjue saw her frown before she took hold of his brother's hand and peered closely at it.

“But- you weren't wielding the Seal.”

“I handled it briefly in order to seal it away in the end,” Nie Huaisang told her. The excited tone in his voice had Nie Mingjue joining the small group to see what was going on. Faint wisps of resentful energy- barely more than small tendrils of ash-gray fog -were escaping around the edges of the muddy streak, evaporating into thin air as they watched.

“I don't-” Wen Qing's frown deepened. “The mud pools shouldn't be capable of this.”

“Or we never knew they were,” Wen Ning corrected. “Wen-*zongzhu* never used them, remember? He *hated* getting muddy, so only the elders used them, and since all of them were sent away long ago-”

“-no one was using them,” Wen Qing finished. She let Nie Huaisang's hand go, her frown shifting to an expression of intense thought.

“Do you think this could help Wei Wuxian?” Nie Mingjue asked softly.

“It's possible,” Wen Qing said absently, “or it could kill him. We'll have to take it slowly.”

“Uh, excuse me, but what's going on?” Wei Wuxian piped up from the bed. Lan Wangji had taken a seat next to him, his guqin floating in the air in front of him in preparation for another round of *Cleansing* to be played.

Wen Qing looked hopeful. “If we're right? A possible start to a solution for the Nie *qi*-deviation issue.”

“And if you're wrong?”

“Then we'll deal with it when we get there.”

Wen Qing was all for getting Wei Wuxian into the mud pool, but she knew that they'd have to take it slow. She shooed Nie Huaisang off to go get changed- “And clean up the mud on your way out!” she called after him -before corralling her brother and Nie Mingjue to help with moving Wei Wuxian outside. Lan Wangji followed after them, guqin on his back once more and sword in hand, Nie Zonghui and Lan Qiuyue accompanying him.

There were several mud pools of varying sizes, ranging from one where two people could fit tightly to one where five or six could easily fit. Statues of protective guardian beasts that were engraved with temperature and cleanliness arrays along their backs stood at the four compass points around each pool, keeping them free of possible disease as well as ensuring that the mud within the pools

remained hot enough to stay liquid but never reached so high a temperature as to cause harm to their users. The arrays also worked to keep the areas around the pools at a comfortable temperature regardless of the season, though moisture still collected on the stone paths surrounding them, as Nie Huaisang could attest to.

The guards set up posts near the smallest of the mud pools while Nie Mingjue erected a variant of the Nie privacy ward that needed only one person to build. Nie Huaisang returned in a fresh set of clothes and boots, passing through the privacy ward with ease before taking a seat on the ground between Wen Ning and Nie Mingjue a few feet away from the pool in a patch of late afternoon sunshine that was managing to peek through a break in the heavy clouds above.

At first, Wen Qing had Wei Wuxian put just his bare feet in the mud pool, monitoring him closely with each passing minute, his wrist held in her hand and her fingers pressed against his pulse point there. Thick curls of resentful energy bubbled up from the mud but Wei Wuxian didn't seem adversely affected by it leaving his system. Lan Wangji sat to one side, playing gentle melodies on his guqin, the arrays carved into the back keeping the heat and moisture in the air from affecting the instrument unduly. They would eventually need to test how *Cleansing* might work alongside the mud pool and its therapeutic effects, but that would have to wait until Wen Qing was sure Wei Wuxian- and, later, Nie Mingjue -could remain within the pool for a suitable period of time.

“Alright,” Wen Qing said once she was happy with how things were going, “sit in the pool. There should be a stone bench that runs around it that will have the mud sit about just below your breastbone. Ease into it; your lower dantian will be entirely submerged once you're done, so I don't want you rushing it. We can always figure out an alternative if it begins hurting more than it is now.”

“Honestly, I'm just sore,” Wei Wuxian said as he slowly but surely lowered himself into the pool with her help. “Like I've been training for an hour or two with *da-ge*.”

“You should only be so lucky,” Nie Mingjue grumbled. “I should've never let you do such a foolish thing.”

“And yet we won the war because of it.” Wei Wuxian blew out a breath as he settled onto the bench, his nose wrinkling. “Oh, I'm going to have mud *everywhere*. At least I'm wearing *some* clothes.”

“I debated having you be entirely naked for this, but I then figured we'd better spare the world the sight of your bare ass,” Wen Qing said dryly, “so pants it was. You can take a bath and wash out all the mud once we're done here. Now, how are you feeling?”

Wei Wuxian mulled over the question, idly poking at a few of the bubbles that lazily rose to the surface along with the escaping resentful energy. “Squishy,” he decided, “but... Hmm...”

He trailed off, and Wen Qing could feel his *qi* start to circulate through his meridians, catching occasionally on stubborn pockets of resentful energy that refused to leave. She allowed her own spiritual energy to follow in his wake, acting as a spectral and impartial observer. His golden core was still heavy with resentful energy, but that heaviness was slowly lifting with all the inevitability of sunrise. They'd likely have to do several sessions in order to remove the resentful energy to a point where simply listening to *Cleansing* a few times would drive the last bits out, but Wen Qing was hopeful.

“Well,” she said after about a half-hour had passed and things had seemed to come to a sort of an equilibrium in Wei Wuxian's system for the time being, “I think that's all we'll be able to do today. Your *qi* feels like it's flowing better, but it's not fully free yet. We'll do this again tomorrow before the banquet, and then once more before you leave.”

“Are you not coming back to Qinghe with us?” Wei Wuxian asked as he slowly but surely made his way out of the mud pool, using the textured steps that some ingenious Wen ancestor had carved into the rock. His clothes clung to his body but no one cared save for Lan Wangji, who had turned his head away with pink-flushed ears at the sight even as he left his guqin-

“I...” Wen Qing sat back on her heels, feeling more than a little bit at a loss. The war had gone so differently this time around, even with certain events staying mostly the same, and she wasn't sure what to do next. “A-Ning and I will need to discuss it,” she said finally. “I doubt we'll stay here. There's little for us here, to be honest. Dafan was our true home, and even now that's not really feasible since our branch of the clan is so scattered and has been for some time.”

“Then come to Qinghe with us,” Nie Mingjue offered. “Or travel some before you make a decision. It's up to you. Just know that you and Wen Ning have a home there if you want it.”

“Thank you, Nie-*zongzhu*,” she said as she got to her feet, banishing the mud on her hands and clothes with a quick burst of spiritual energy. She bowed to him, her heart feeling oddly light. Wen Qing looked over at her brother, a fond smile curving her lips when she saw how he and Nie Huaisang were leaning against one another, dozing away in the sunshine like a pair of content cats. A lot would have to be done to redeem the Wen name, and gods only knew if the Dafan Wen would be allowed any sort of say in the cultivation world or if they'd all be tarred with Wen Ruohan's brush once more, but she was willing to put in the hard work if it meant that her people could live in peace.

It was all she could do with the gift she'd been given of more time, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Look, if the Cold Springs can exist and be a plot point, then fuck it, magic mud pools/hot springs can exist too.

OC name in this chapter (Lan Qiuyue) means "Autumn Moon" (or so I'm told by the internet, which... well, I apologize if I've been told wrong and/or have come up with some truly awful names)

Interlude

Chapter Notes

This is a ridiculously fluffy and self-indulgent chapter. It's also the last one I'll likely be writing until December, as I'll be participating in National Novel Writing Month during the whole of November, and using the last week of October to prep for that. I'm not abandoning this fic in any way, shape, or form, trust me. It's just going on a very temporary hiatus.

Here is a silly thought I had when writing the first few sections of this chapter:

Nie Huaisang: Oo, a brother! *yoink* Mine now.

The rest of the cultivation world: Pick a brother. Pick... Pick fewer brothers than that. Put some brothers back; that's too many...

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The banquet celebrating the end of the war took place the next evening, the kitchens of the palace raided and then used to provide the food and refreshments. Nie Huaisang looked around the hall, wine bowl in hand. The atmosphere was as celebratory as it had been last time, and perhaps even a bit more so given the Jiang sect wasn't wearing white accents to signify the mourning of their former leaders. Jiang Fengmian was in deep discussion with several other sect leaders, holding court across the room from where Jiang Cheng was sitting on his own.

“Well, that won't do,” Nie Huaisang muttered. He checked to make sure Wei Wuxian was still safely tucked between Lan Wangji and Nie Zonghui- he was, thank the gods -and then made his way over to Jiang Cheng's table, bestowing his friend a bright smile.

“Jiang-xiong! Mind if I join you?”

Jiang Cheng looked up, seeming surprised that someone would come over, and then waved for Nie Huaisang to sit down. Nie Huaisang snagged a low chair from an empty table- he'd return it if its owner demanded it -pulled it over to Jiang Cheng's table, and then took a seat next to him.

“How're you doing? Enjoying the feast?”

Jiang Cheng shrugged. “It's good. At least the Lan weren't the ones cooking; there's actually flavor in the food. And the wine isn't bad.”

“Very true,” Nie Huaisang said with a laugh. It may have been more than a little juvenile, but he waited until Jiang Cheng had lifted his wine bowl to take a drink before continuing on with a proposal he had.

“I propose we swear brotherhood with one another- you, me, and Jin Zixuan,” he said. Jiang Cheng nearly choked on his drink. Nie Huaisang found the action funny but the mess created by his spluttering less so.

“Wh-what? *Why?*”

“Why the three of us or why the brotherhood?”

“Both!”

Nie Huaisang set down his wine bowl and sighed. “First of all, it'd be a good political move, both personally and because it'll help curtail some of Jin-*zongzhu's* maneuverings. Second, we all just came through a war together. I don't want to lose that feeling of comradeship. As for why the three of us, it'll be auspicious to have the heirs to three of the four Great Sects bound together in the bonds of brotherhood.”

“What about the Lan? Won't they be mad about being left out?”

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes so hard it nearly hurt. “Wei Wuxian is betrothed to marry Lan Wangji and *da-ge* is gearing up to begin courting both Lan Xichen and Meng Yao. The Lan aren't being left out, trust me.”

“Wait, both of them? How's that going to work out if Lan Xichen and your brother are both sect leaders?”

“Meng Yao will be the First Consort of Nie and of Lan if everything goes well,” Nie Huaisang said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “As for how it's going to work physically, I trust they can work it out among themselves. I have no desire to know the intricacies of my older brother's love life. In regards to heirs, that's taken care of by myself and Lan Wangji unless they adopt or use a surrogate, and knowing my brother, I have little doubt they'll be childless for too long after the marriage. The tricky thing will be getting the Lan elders to agree to it, to be honest, but I know *da-ge* is stubborn enough to go head-to-head with them for one of the people who holds his heart.”

He took a drink and then continued on. “I'm going to call Jin Zixuan *xiongzhang* rather than *da-ge* if he agrees to this, because I am not about to get confused over which older brother I'm talking about, especially when both of them are in one room like they are now. It might not be traditional, but still, far easier in the long run.”

“Would I have to call you *da-ge*?” Jiang Cheng asked warily.

“Of course not. *Er-ge* is perfectly acceptable. Besides, you'd be calling Jin Zixuan *jiefu* anyways once he and your sister marry since that relationship would override the sworn brotherhood for the most part.”

Nie Huaisang paused. “And one final good reason is because I value you as my friends,” he said quietly. “I know we've exchanged letters for years, but having a closer relationship than that would be nice.”

Jiang Cheng stared off into space with a pensive expression, tapping the fingers of one hand against the lacquered wood of the table. “We're old enough that we wouldn't have to ask our parents or guardians,” he decided after a minute or so of contemplation. “Have you asked Jin Zixuan yet?”

“No,” Nie Huaisang said with a shake of his head. “I wanted to ask you first. Besides, I'll have to figure out a way to drag him away from all the hangers-on fluttering around him like butterflies.”

Jiang Cheng snorted sharply. "He's lucky my sister loves him so much. If he's anything like his father--"

"Trust me, he isn't," Nie Huaisang assured him. "I wouldn't have stayed friends with him for so long if he was a copy of his father in any way."

They talked for a little while longer, Jiang Cheng informing him that Jiang Yanli was doing well, as were his dogs- at least, according to Jiang Fengmian. Jiang Yanli had been sent to Meishan during the war, only returning to Lotus Pier the day after Wen Ruohan's death. Nie Huaisang was glad to hear she was doing well, as he'd always liked the eldest Jiang sibling. She was kind and, if his brother had been even remotely attracted to women and she not already betrothed, someone Nie Huaisang could have seen Nie Mingjue marrying. There was steel under all that silk and grace, and Jin Zixuan was a very lucky man to have her devotion and love.

Nie Huaisang made his goodbyes and skirted the edges of the party, figuring that it would be faster to get to Jin Zixuan that way. He stepped into a shadowy alcove to let a group of Yao disciples pass by, and just as he was about to continue on his way, he heard Jin Guangshan's voice ring out from nearby.

"Meng Yao! A word."

Nie Huaisang drew in a quiet breath and moved just enough so he could see what was going on. Jin Guangshan's back was to him and he could see Meng Yao from where he was standing. Meng Yao smiled politely- *Smile 49, "I really don't want to talk to you but I guess I have to in order to save face"*, Nie Huaisang thought -and then bowed, not going one inch beyond what society demanded.

"Jin-zongzhu. How can this one help you?"

"Meng Yao, I've heard many good things about you from Nie-zongzhu and others," Jin Guangshan said, tucking his hands behind his back. "I am also not unaware of whose son you are. I recognize your... devotion ...to the Nie sect, but I would like to offer you a place by my side. I'm willing to recognize you as a proper Jin and give you a courtesy name as well. Perhaps something like... Jin Guangyao. You would have to leave the Nie sect, but I'm sure Nie-zongzhu can find someone else to take up your duties there."

Nie Huaisang watched with bated breath from the shadows as Meng Yao thought over the offer and then bowed to Jin Guangshan.

"I thank you for your offer, Jin-zongzhu, but I'm afraid I must decline," he said as he straightened up. Jin Guangshan puffed up like an affronted cat denied a particularly choice piece of meat.

"Decline?! Why? I'm offering you a good name and a place at my side, boy!"

Meng Yao's polite smile became fixed. "Had you offered when I was younger, before I met Nie-zongzhu and Nie-gongzi, I would have likely taken you up on that offer in a heartbeat. However, I was a child then, and children often wish for and dream of impossible things. I'm happy with my station in life *and* my name. If possible, however, I would be honored to get to know Jin-gongzi better, even without the recognition. We are brothers, after all, even if our family names aren't the same."

Jin Guangshan stared at him, huffed, and then stalked off like a petulant small child. Meng Yao closed his eyes, took in a calming breath, and then let it out slowly before opening his eyes once

more.

“You can come out, Huaisang.”

Nie Huaisang stepped out of the alcove with a sheepish smile. “I didn't mean to overhear that,” he apologized.

“No, but I think Jin-*zongzhu* meant for you to,” Meng Yao said. “That alcove isn't as concealed as you'd think, sadly. Why else would Jin-*zongzhu* have mentioned my devotion to Nie-*zongzhu* when he wants it for himself?”

Nie Huaisang scoffed. “What he wants is the fame of having a war hero in his sect, and what better than the person who killed Wen Ruohan?” he pointed out. “And that name- It's clear he doesn't want to recognize you as a *proper* son, or otherwise it'd have been Jin Ziyao. I'm glad you turned him down, Yao-ge. Sometimes I think only Jin Zixuan and Luo-*guniang* are the only two respectable people in Koi Tower.”

“You may be right,” Meng Yao agreed. “Now, where were you headed before you got waylaid?”

“I was going to search out Jin Zixuan, actually,” Nie Huaisang said, “assuming I can get him away for a conversation, anyways. Last I saw, he was surrounded by people.”

“I wish you luck with that. Something tells me you'll need it.”

Meng Yao glanced around the room, a smile warming his face when his gaze landed on a particular spot. Nie Huaisang followed his line of sight, laughing quietly when he saw Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen talking companionably with one another.

“Go and talk with them,” he said. “I'll be fine on my own, Yao-ge. At least with both of them there, Jin-*zongzhu* won't try to bother you again.”

“Ah, I wouldn't want to interrupt them,” Meng Yao demurred.

“I don't think they'd see it that way. Go. We can catch up on all the gossip later.”

Nie Huaisang waited until Meng Yao had crossed the room and joined Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen- both of whom welcomed him with pleased smiles -before going in search of Jin Zixuan once more. As expected, the Jin heir was surrounded by people wanting to talk to him. What Nie Huaisang *wasn't* expecting, however, was for Jin Zixuan to focus on him with a highly relieved expression.

“Ah, Nie-*xiong*! How are you doing?”

“Well enough, thank you, Jin-*xiong*. I was wondering if I might have a word with you about that topic we discussed earlier?”

Jin Zixuan latched on to the opportunity with all the eagerness of a drowning man grabbing hold of a rope and extricated himself from the group, gladly slinging an arm around Nie Huaisang's shoulders as they moved away. They wandered through the party and then headed outside, the chill of the night air a welcome relief from the stuffiness of the banquet.

“You looked like you were having fun,” Nie Huaisang said dryly. “Do you really hate banquets all that much?”

“No, no, it's just-” Jin Zixuan shook his head. “Usually I can escape from time to time when they're held back home. I like banquets well enough, but they can get overwhelming after a while.” He stared out over the snow-dusted landscape before them, hands clasped at the small of his back. “What did you want to talk to me about, or was that just a much-needed rescue?”

“Oh, I do actually want to talk to you about something; the rescue was coincidental,” Nie Huaisang assured him. “What would you think about becoming sworn brothers with myself and Jiang-xiong?”

Jin Zixuan stiffened in surprise and then turned to look at him, clearly not expecting to have heard that. “You... would want to become sworn brothers with me?”

Nie Huaisang was suddenly struck by how similar Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng were. Oh, they definitely had their differences- Jiang Cheng hid his insecurities behind bluster and anger while Jin Zixuan hid his behind a pompous mask -but neither of them seemed confident that others would pick them first for any reason, sect heirs or not.

“And with Jiang Cheng, but yes,” Nie Huaisang confirmed. “And before you ask, no, the Lan aren't being left out. They'll be tied to us in a different way with Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian's marriage, among other things.”

“It seems like the Nie sect would benefit the most, being so closely tied to the other three Great Sects,” Jin Zixuan mused. Nie Huaisang shrugged carelessly.

“Not any more than we already do, to be honest,” he said. “Besides, *da-ge* and Lan Xichen have been friends for *ages* and no one's complaining about that. I highly doubt they'll complain about us being sworn brothers.”

“My father might.”

“Your father,” Nie Huaisang said, his tone shifting to a more serious one, “can complain all he wants. We're all adults now. We've fought in a war together. You'll be getting married in, what, a year and four months or so? If you're old enough to have fought in a war and be nearly married, you're old enough to swear other oaths. Besides, it'd be very odd for him to complain about you making good political ties, regardless of any other reasons we might have to swear brotherhood.”

Jin Zixuan ran a hand over his mouth as he thought. Nie Huaisang waited patiently, tucking his hands into his sleeves to keep them warm. He watched as the snow started to fall in thin curtains beyond the overhang of the roof, the gentle sound of the snow adding to the accumulation lingering on the ground barely audible over the murmur of conversations from within the hall.

“I've never been an older brother before,” Jin Zixuan said eventually. “I'm not sure if I know how to be one.”

Nie Huaisang grinned. “Don't worry. You'll learn soon enough.”

They held the ceremony the next morning, arranging it so it began just as the sun rose. Meng Yao, Nie Mingjue, and Jiang Fengmian witnessed it of their own choice, even though it wasn't strictly necessary. Nie Huaisang was glad that Jiang Fengmian had roused himself enough to oversee the oath, knowing how much Jiang Cheng sought his father's validation. While Wei Wuxian had been

excited to hear about the ceremony, he'd been escorted back to the healing hall and then the Nie quarters by Wen Qing after the banquet had ended so she could get him at least one more treatment in the mud pools before he returned to Qinghe and therefore hadn't been able to get up in time.

Once the last bow was performed and the ceremony concluded, the three newly sworn siblings toasted one another with a small cup of wine before accepting congratulations from those watching. Jin Guangshan's absence was a telling one when compared to Nie Mingjue and Jiang Fengmian's presences, but it also wasn't unexpected, either. Jin Zixuan didn't seem surprised that his father wasn't there, instead accepting the well-wishes from the others. Nie Huaisang did notice that he seemed happy to have at least Meng Yao there, flushing mildly under the congratulations his half-brother gave him.

"You two are welcome in Qinghe at any time," Nie Huaisang told Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng. "I mean it. You'll have rooms there whenever you want or need, even if it's just to get away for a bit." He poked Jiang Cheng in the arm when the younger man looked doubtful. "Don't you dare refuse, Cheng-di. You're family now and that means you get a room of your own. Honestly, I'm not going to make you sleep in a *guest* room."

Jiang Cheng's eyebrows rose. "Not A-Cheng?"

"Do you want us to call you that?" Jin Zixuan asked, amused.

"I-" Jiang Cheng huffed sharply. "Maybe... Maybe later. After it settles in." He crossed his arms. "You'll be family twice over anyways when you marry A-Jie. I *guess* you'll have the right to call me that," he said, jerking his chin at Jin Zixuan. He looked over at Nie Huaisang. "You... Fine. Call me whatever."

"Cheng-di it is for now, then," Nie Huaisang said cheerily. He caught sight of Nie Mingjue's surprisingly patiently waiting form out of the corner of his eye and then sighed. "I suppose we'd best get going. Breakfast and then packing to go back home. I'll see you two later."

He bowed shallowly to Jin Zixuan and then Jiang Cheng in turn. "*Xiongzhang*, Cheng-di. Until we meet again."

"Safe travels, *er-ge*," Jiang Cheng said as he returned the bow, Jin Zixuan following suit.

"Safe travels, A-Sang."

Nie Huaisang beamed at the two of them before going to join his brother and Meng Yao. Nie Mingjue clapped him on the shoulder, nodded to the others, and then led the way back to their temporary quarters, Meng Yao splitting off to get his own things packed. Wei Wuxian was still sprawled under the covers in his bed, one arm thrown over his face and his hair in a tangled cloud around his head as he snored quietly away. Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes, strode over to the bed, and then yanked the blankets away from Wei Wuxian's slumbering form in a practiced motion. Wei Wuxian groaned at the sudden loss of the warm covers, curling up like a shrimp in an attempt to conserve heat.

"Come on, up you get," Nie Mingjue insisted. "You need to get ready for Wen-yisheng to do your final treatment before we go back home."

Wei Wuxian cracked an eye open and glared sleepily at the two of them. "I was having a very nice dream. You couldn't have waited a few more minutes?"

“No, sorry,” Nie Huaisang said.

“You're not sorry at all.” Wei Wuxian sat up, pushing his hair out of his face as he did so. “How'd the ceremony go?”

“Perfectly, though Jin-*zongzhu* couldn't be bothered to make it.” Nie Mingjue shook his head. “You'd think he'd want to celebrate his heir making alliances at the very least.”

“We all know that Jin-*zongzhu* only thinks of one person at any time, and that's himself,” Nie Huaisang said as he set to packing up as well. Wei Wuxian hummed in agreement as he went about his morning routine, though his usual bath would be save for after he returned from the mud pool. Wen Qing came to fetch him, Lan Wangji accompanying her with his guqin on his back to continue the musical part of the cleansing therapy.

Nie Mingjue had yet to go into the mud baths himself, mainly because Wen Qing wanted to study it more and see if the cleansing effect was due to the water, the mud, or a combination of both, as well as if the statues with the cleanliness and temperature arrays had anything to do with it. If the effect could be replicated elsewhere, then it would mean that with the right set up, a cleansing pool could be created and maintained in the Unclean Realm and visits to Qishan wouldn't be necessary.

The matter of what would happen to the Nightless City and Qishan had yet to be decided. Night hunts would still need to happen, and as the two sects closest to the area, the Nie and Jiang would keep an eye on the territory until plans were finalized. Nie Huaisang thought that the easiest thing to do would be for the Dafan Wen to simply take over control of the territory, but he had no idea who would lead the sect or if they even wanted that kind of responsibility. Something would have to be done regardless to keep the area safe for those living there, but only time would tell if a cultivation sect would hold residence there once more.

By the time Wei Wuxian returned, Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang had finished packing and a bath was waiting for him behind a privacy screen, its water kept pleasantly hot with a few well-placed talismans. Wen Ning and Wen Qing followed him into the room. Both of them were dressed for travel in practical clothing, several *qiankun* pouches on each of their belts likely filled with the supplies they'd need for their trip. Nie Huaisang bit his lip and then drew Wen Ning outside once he'd grabbed his cloak again and put it on.

“So,” he said as they started walking, “where will you and your sister be going?”

“All around,” Wen Ning said with a sigh. “We're going to check in on our relatives and talk with the few remaining elders about what's to happen.”

“Who would be the head of the clan and sect if we follow the line of succession?” Nie Huaisang asked. Wen Ning pulled his own cloak tighter around his shoulders as he thought.

“Wen Ruohan was our second cousin,” he said. “Our grandfathers were brothers. If there's no one closer or who's willing to take the position, it may fall to *jiejie* or me. Succession in the sect goes to the eldest, normally, but I don't think she'd want to stop being a doctor.” He shook his head. “I don't know if I'm ready to be a sect leader, assuming the rest of the cultivation world doesn't try to carve Qishan up like a roast chicken.”

“You could always do what *da-ge* did and have a council of elders until you're old enough,” Nie Huaisang suggested, “but you're right, that assumes the rest of the sects will allow you to take the reins. Do you think that would be something you'd want?”

"I don't know," Wen Ning admitted. "I've never really considered it." They paused on one of the many balconies that overlooked the lava flows below, standing side-by-side as they leaned against the railing. Wen Ning nudged Nie Huaisang. "Maybe an old friend could help me figure things out."

Nie Huaisang laughed. "What, you'd want the Head-Shaker as your advisor? We used to know a lot of people who'd look at you as if you were insane if they heard that."

Wen Ning drew in a quiet breath and then let it out slowly. "Advisor? Maybe. If that was the role you wanted by my side."

Nie Huaisang turned to look at him fully, his heartbeat starting to pick up and a sweet sort of anticipation beginning to build in the pit of his stomach. "And what other role could you see me having at your side?"

He wasn't dumb- the attraction between the two of them was undeniable, even if they'd never spoke of it aloud so far -but he wanted to hear it straight from Wen Ning's mouth rather than making any sort of assumption.

"E-even if someone else becomes Wen-*zongzhu* or the other Great Sects decide that the Dafan Wen should remain a minor sect or no sect at all, I- I would want to be selfish and have you by my side as my husband," Wen Ning admitted, the color in his cheeks only partially due to the cold. "After a proper courting and once we're of age, of course! I think both of our older siblings would kill us if we eloped before then. Or after then, to be honest."

"Oh, *da-ge* would be angry for sure, and I honestly try not to get him angry these days," Nie Huaisang said with a smile so large his cheeks ached a little from it. "And Wen Ning?"

"Y-yes?"

"I want you by my side as my husband as well when we're old enough, regardless of what rank you might hold at the time. Two or three years seems a perfectly reasonable time for courtship and planning a wedding, don't you think? Of course, I'd love to see *da-ge* or Wei-*di* married as well, but *da-ge* is dragging his feet on getting his courtship started and we've got another year before we can see Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji married and-"

Nie Huaisang stopped talking when Wen Ning placed a hand over his mouth. He shot Wen Ning an amused look, waiting until the hand was taken away before speaking again.

"Was I talking too much?"

"Just a bit."

Wen Ning took hold of his hands, rubbing his thumbs over their backs. Nie Huaisang wanted nothing more than to stay in that warm grasp forever, even though he knew it wasn't possible.

"Sorry."

Wen Ning shook his head. "Don't be. I... I don't know how long we'll be on the road. We'll probably go to Lotus Pier first since we know you'll have things handled in Qinghe and the Lans in Gusu. The snow will make travel hard by foot, so we may have to ride out the winter there if it gets worse than it already is."

“We still have our communication journals,” Nie Huaisang pointed out. “We can write one another while you're gone. Or... you could winter in Qinghe and then go once the roads are better. We can give you horses, or... Or you could go by sword. The snow won't affect you as much, but the wind might.”

“Nie Huaisang-”

“Just Huaisang, Or A-Sang, if you prefer that.”

“A-Sang,” Wen Ning said with a laugh and a fond smile. “We need to go now and you know it. We can't let things get like they were last time. We need to make sure the Dafan Wen are safe.”

Nie Huaisang wasn't pouting. He was just... greatly disappointed in how the universe was conspiring to keep him away from his first taste of young love in either timeline.

“Do you think your sister would be offended if you had your first kiss at fifteen?”

“I'll be sixteen in a little over four months,” Wen Ning said. “I don't think she'll mind. Besides, she's not here right now. Only we are, and that's what matters.”

“Oh, good.” Nie Huaisang nodded decisively. “Then may I *please* kiss you?”

Wen Ning grinned before closing the gap between them and leaning in. Nie Huaisang met him halfway, hardly minding the height difference between them. The angle was a little awkward at first, but with some maneuvering on both their parts that was soon rectified. Nie Huaisang let out a disappointed noise when Wen Ning moved away, blinking a few times as he readjusted to a reality where he wasn't being kissed.

“We should be back in Qinghe by early summer at the latest,” Wen Ning said. “I'll make sure to send your birthday present so it gets there on the right day.”

“You don't have to do that.” Nie Huaisang wrapped his arms around Wen Ning in a tight hug. “Be safe, alright? And write me in the evenings?”

“I will, I promise.” Wen Ning kissed him on the forehead before returning the embrace. “You be safe as well, alright?”

“Like *da-ge* would allow anything else.”

They returned to their siblings after a few more minutes of stolen time, holding one another's hands and not caring who saw them. Wen Qing said nothing, though the pointed look she gave Nie Huaisang promised much pain if he so much as *thought* about hurting Wen Ning. He merely nodded to her, ignored the knowing looks his brothers shot his way, and then went about the business of grabbing his belongings after he let go of Wen Ning's hand.

It was hard seeing Wen Ning and Wen Qing off when it came time to leave. Nie Huaisang watched them fly off toward Yunmeng until they were out of sight, knowing it was important for them to go but hating it all the same. He stepped on to Yaotou when it was time for him and the rest of the Nie contingent to leave, a spray of snow rising as their swords took to the air. They left the Nightless City behind, heading north-east and home.

While he'd extended the invitation for Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan to visit whenever they liked, Nie Huaisang hadn't expected to see either one of them in the Unclean Realm for a while after the Sunshot Campaign ended. All of the sects, Great and otherwise, were concentrating on rebuilding their numbers and taking care of all the problems that had been deemed too minor to deal with when there was a war going on. He was surprised, therefore, to see Jin Zixuan arriving shortly after the other's birthday as winter slowly began to give way to spring.

The Jin heir was accompanied by Mianmian and no one else, something that would've been otherwise considered scandalous in nearly any other sect besides Qinghe Nie. Nie Huaisang had been in the middle of sparring with Wei Wuxian when Jin Zixuan's arrival was announced, their swords clashing together just as Fang Bohai, one of the senior disciples, came with the news.

"Huh. I wonder what he wants," Wei Wuxian said as the two of them quickly cleaned up.

"No idea. Would you go let *da-ge* and Yao-ge know? If nothing else, I'm sure Yao-ge would like to talk to *xiongzhang*." Nie Huaisang hummed. "Oh, and maybe get A-Yu as well. He might like to get to know his *er-ge* finally."

"You think that's wise?"

"Couldn't hurt. The worst thing that could happen is that A-Yu says no to meeting *xiongzhang*. The best case scenario is that they like one another and want to know one another better."

Wei Wuxian didn't seem particularly convinced but went off anyways, leaving Nie Huaisang to go in search of Jin Zixuan. He found him in one of the enclosed pavilions that a former Nie Sect leader had created for her spouse, the heads of early spring mountain flowers beginning to peek above the frosty dirt in the beds around it.

"Ah, *xiongzhang*! To what do I owe the honor of your and Luo-*guniang*'s illustrious presences?" he asked as he stepped into the warm interior of the pavilion. He waved off any attempts at bows and took a seat at the table in the center of the pavilion across from his two guests. "And please excuse my informal outfit; Wei-*di* and I were sparring before you came."

"No need to apologize, A-Sang," Jin Zixuan said. Now that Nie Huaisang could see him more clearly, he looked exhausted.

"Is everything alright?"

"Father is..." Jin Zixuan shook his head. "He's been working on getting the Baifeng Mountain Crowd Hunt organized again to be held this fall, as well as the wedding in fourteen months' time. It's like he wants to make sure the whole of the cultivation world knows how powerful we are even after the war."

Nie Huaisang sat back as a servant brought refreshments for the three of them. He waited until they were alone again before speaking. "How blunt do you want me to be? Because I can be absolutely truthful or I can hide behind pretty words. It's your choice."

Contrary to how he expected his words to affect his sworn brother, Jin Zixuan actually seemed to relax at what Nie Huaisang said.

"I'd appreciate the truth. I get enough pretty words back home."

“Then it's not a 'like', it's a 'definitely',” Nie Huaisang said as he poured each of them a cup of tea. “Lanling Jin didn't take as hard a hit as any of the other sects did, Great or otherwise, in the war against Wen Ruohan. That was mainly due to your father delaying his support as much as he could, and we all know it.”

He set down the teapot and then picked up his cup. “Have you heard or seen what's been done with the prisoners of war being kept in Lanling?”

Jin Zixuan frowned. “My cousin is overseeing the relocation camps.”

“Camps? Plural? That-” Nie Huaisang shook his head. “There should barely be enough Qishan Wen cultivators that went into Lanling to fill one camp, let alone several.”

“I don't know,” Jin Zixuan admitted, exchanging an uncomfortable look with Mianmian. “Jin Zixun just keeps going on about how the Wen dogs are being kept where they belong: in the dirt.”

“I would suggest,” Nie Huaisang said gravely, “that you look into it as swiftly and discreetly as you can. I'm going to be completely honest with you, *xiongzhong*. I don't trust your cousin or father for any length longer than I can throw them with my bare hands.”

“And not with your fans?” Mianmian asked with an amused arch of her eyebrows.

“I can manage a far greater distance with those, and I like keeping those I don't trust close at hand so I can see when the viper strikes. I would apologize for being so blunt, but Jin-*zongzhu* has already sent several letters to *da-ge* saying that we should turn the Stygian Tiger Amulet over to him for safekeeping. It will be destroyed soon enough. We just need to make sure Wei Wuxian can survive the destruction,” Nie Huaisang replied before drinking some of his tea. He observed Jin Zixuan over the rim of his cup, watching his sworn brother digest what he'd been told.

“Enough of heavy things. You mentioned the Baifeng Mountain Crowd Hunt?” he asked lightly. “That should be interesting.”

“Hopefully,” Jin Zixuan said. “He's got all of his aides, warders, and hunters working on getting things ready now even though it's so far away. Mother is taking care of the wedding along with Madam Yu and A-Li. I'm happy to let them do what they like; I just need to show up to the tailors' every so often to get fitted for my robes and other things.”

Nie Huaisang chuckled. “A-Li? Things are going that well?”

To his delight, Jin Zixuan blushed at the teasing tone, his cheeks darkening. “She has been very kind to me,” he said with a fond smile. “I don't deserve her, to be honest. I was very...” He shook his head.

“Stubborn? Horrible with words?” Mianmian suggested, grinning. “An idiot?”

Jin Zixuan huffed. “Yes, yes, all of that,” he said with a laugh, “but to be fair, would *you* have been happy if you were told when you were young that your marriage was already decided for you when you were born?”

“Mm, probably not,” Mianmian agreed, picking up one of the little cakes that had been brought along with the tea. “At least *someone* knocked some sense into you when you were young. Imagine if you hadn't started exchanging letters with Jiang-*guniang* back then. You would've been

insufferable over the years regarding her. You probably wouldn't have taken that walk with her in the Cloud Recesses, for example.”

“I would've been miserable.”

Jin Zixuan drank some tea, curling his hands around the porcelain. He looked up at Nie Huaisang, who smiled innocently at him. The letters had honestly been a way to make sure that Jin Ling came into being again at roughly the right time as the other juniors, as Nie Huaisang had rather liked all of them. Jin Ling had been a surprisingly good sect leader as he aged, and his compatriots had done equally well leading their own sects when the time came. It would be fascinating to see how Jin Ling grew up with his parents actually in his life, as well as the support of more than just Jiang Cheng and Jin Guangyao.

Nie Huaisang straightened up from his casual light slouch when he saw Meng Yao and Mo Xuanyu approaching the pavilion through a window, a warm smile passing across his face. “Yao-ge! A-Yu! Come join us,” he said, waving at the free seats around the table. “We're just having some tea and snacks if you're up for them.”

“Ah. Jin-gongzi. Luo-guniang,” Meng Yao said as he and Mo Xuanyu came to a halt nearby. “Wei Wuxian mentioned you'd arrived. Is it alright if we join you?”

Jin Zixuan was a little wide-eyed as he took in Mo Xuanyu, his gaze darting this way and that in a not-so-subtle effort to find features they shared.

“Of course,” he said. “By all means. There's more than enough tea and food for everyone.”

“I'm honestly surprised Wei Wuxian hasn't come to steal an osmanthus cake,” Nie Huaisang said with a laugh as the others sat. “Now, introductions. A-Yu, this is Jin Zixuan, my eldest sworn brother, and Luo-guniang, one of the best Jin disciples I know.”

“Flatterer.”

“Ah, I'm only telling the truth. *Xiongzhong*, Luo-guniang, this is one of my *shidis*, Mo Xuanyu.”

Mo Xuanyu quickly got to his feet and bowed properly, nearly hitting his knees on the table. “A pleasure to meet you both,” he said before taking his seat once more.

“And you,” Jin Zixuan said. He glanced over at Nie Huaisang. “Does, uh, does he-”

“Ah, my apologies. A-Yu, Jin Zixuan is your *er-ge* just as Yao-ge is your *da-ge*,” Nie Huaisang said. “You share the same father.”

Mo Xuanyu huffed with all the annoyance a newly-turned eleven year old could muster. “I remember,” he said. “It's nice to meet you finally, *er-ge*.”

“Do you like being in the Nie sect?” Jin Zixuan asked awkwardly as Meng Yao retrieved tea cups for himself and Mo Xuanyu before pouring the tea. Mo Xuanyu nodded.

“I do!” he said happily, reaching out to snag an osmanthus cake. “I get my sword when I turn twelve. I haven't decided if I want a saber or a sword like what *er-shixiong* and *da-shixiong* have, but I've got some time.” He wrinkled his nose. “I have to work on strengthening my golden core more, though.”

“Oh?” Jin Zixuan began to relax. “I’ve always wondered how the Nie do it. I know the Lan meditate a lot, and we Jin do much the same. I’m going to guess... sword forms?”

Mo Xuanyu groaned. “Sword forms and foot drills and *running*,” he complained, his fingers sticky with honey.

“There’s also meditation,” Meng Yao reminded him, the corners of his eyes crinkling in amusement. “But the forms and drills make sure you remember how to move, and the running keeps you strong and fit.”

“I know, but they don’t even allow me a good blade! It’s *wooden*.”

“Weighted wood,” Nie Huaisang explained when he caught the others’ looks. “We don’t allow our juniors live steel until they’ve proven they can handle the safer version. There’re always bumps and bruises and the occasional broken bone or concussion, but it’s better than a lost limb or life.”

“True,” Mianmian agreed. “That’s surprisingly sensible.”

“Thank you.”

Nie Huaisang refreshed his tea, pleased that everything was going so well. He sat back and watched the others interact, content in how his life was at the moment. He knew that there would be plenty of problems to deal with, both in the near and far future, but for the time being he was going to enjoy good tea and the company of friends and family.

As spring fully came to rule over the land, Nie Mingjue found himself dealing with the intricacies of the Wen prisoners of war that were still housed in Qinghe. The civilians had been sent back to their villages and towns once it was safe for them to go, but it was the question of the cultivators and soldiers that kept Nie Mingjue busy. In the prior timeline, they hadn’t been as well-organized and Lanling Jin had taken over dealing with the prisoners of war, something that Nie Mingjue sorely regretted allowing.

At the moment, the prisoners were being housed in a simple village that had been quickly constructed for them to survive the winter, but now that the weather had turned more palatable, Nie Mingjue knew that they needed to be dealt with before Jin Guangshan got any *ideas* about what should be done with them. He’d sent out plain-clothes scouts to look at the camps in Lanling, decidedly not liking what Jin Zixuan had said about his cousin keeping the Wen in the dirt but knowing they couldn’t do anything about it at the moment.

The thorny puzzle of what to do with the Wen prisoners was what he was mulling over when Meng Yao knocked on the door to his office and then entered it a few scant seconds after Nie Mingjue had told him to do so. The interruption was a welcome one, made even more so by the unexpected presence of Lan Xichen bearing a large wooden tray with food and drink on it.

“Xichen-*xiong*. Meng Yao. Please tell me you’re here to rescue me from the never-ending piles of paperwork,” Nie Mingjue said, rising from behind his desk with a faint groan. “You’d think that people would have less problems after a war, not more.”

“And yet here we are,” Lan Xichen said as he set the tray down on the side table before straightening up. “Have you taken a break recently?”

“He's been in here since just after breakfast,” Meng Yao told him, “and lunch is well past.”

“Aiya, have you no shame?” Nie Mingjue grumbled good-naturedly. “Spilling my secrets to the world without pause. Is this what I get for making you Head Deputy so young, Meng Yao?”

“Yes,” Meng Yao replied without a hint of hesitation. “Someone has to look after you since you clearly won't do it yourself.”

“He has a point,” Lan Xichen said, hiding a laugh behind a sleeve when Nie Mingjue shot him a look.

“Bah, taking his side? I see how it is.”

Nie Mingjue took a seat at the table with his back to the wall, waving for the others to join him. Lan Xichen sat to his right and Meng Yao to his left. The presence of three tea cups on the tray told him that they'd expected him to at least share a drink with him. He certainly didn't mind the expectation. It was nice to simply sit in peace and drink tea in his home without having to worry about being attacked. He poured the tea for all of them- pu-erh, judging from the color and scent - before settling in to satisfy his hunger with the snacks that had been provided.

“So, what was it that had you so enthralled for you to miss lunch?” Lan Xichen asked in between sips of tea. Nie Mingjue finished his current mouthful of food, his mustache twitching in annoyance.

“Trying to figure out what to do with the prisoners of war. They haven't tried to escape or anything. Maybe they weren't expecting to be treated so well,” he mused. “All of my people there say that they've settled in and seem to be content.”

“Likely because they're not under the rule of someone using resentful energy to turn them into abominations even after they die,” Meng Yao pointed out.

“True. It's much the same in Gusu,” Lan Xichen said. “Have you heard anything from Wen Ning or Wen Qing recently about what they've decided, if anything?”

“Last we knew, they were leaving Yunmeng and heading toward Lanling, but that was a few days ago,” Nie Mingjue reported with a frown. “There were less of the Dafan Wen in Yunmeng than expected. They've sent what elders they can find here and are continuing on to Lanling.”

“That is odd.” Lan Xichen hummed. “I'll send some scouts toward Lanling when I get back to Gusu.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it.”

Meng Yao nudged Nie Mingjue. “Eat. Dinner's still some ways away yet.”

“Yes, mother.”

“Someone's got to look after you, just as I said earlier,” Meng Yao said. “You insist on ignoring what you need in favor of taking care of others.”

“He's always been like that,” Lan Xichen added. “It's admirable up to a point.”

“And then it gets vexing.”

Nie Mingjue listened the two of them go back and forth as he ate, soaking in the warm and casual atmosphere. He sat back when he finished eating, feeling content and happy. It was a stark difference from how they'd been around this time in the prior timeline. They may not be sworn brothers this time around, but the relationship he, Lan Xichen, and Meng Yao shared now was far more healthy and equitable than it had been before.

Not entirely, though, but Nie Mingjue had a way to change that, assuming his suit was accepted. He took in a quiet breath, let it out slowly, and then got to his feet. He skirted around Meng Yao, one hand idly brushing against the younger man's back as he moved.

"Everything alright, Mingjue-*xiong*?" Lan Xichen asked.

"Perfect," Nie Mingjue confirmed even as his stomach began to churn with mild anxiety. Baxia stayed quiescent in her stand near his desk, the saber spirit feeling oddly maternal over the bond they shared. That was the last thing he needed, his sword thinking she needed to mother him, but Nie Mingjue appreciated it nonetheless. Having her give away his emotions right then would've been disastrous, so he'd take the fondness she was projecting his way.

"I... would like your thoughts on something," he said as he retrieved the lacquered box from the cabinet he'd locked it in all those months ago. As Nie Mingjue crossed the short distance back to the table, Lan Xichen gathered the tea things back onto the tray and then moved them aside so there was enough room for the box to sit in. Nie Mingjue resumed his seat after setting the box down, straightening his posture so he could steel himself for polite rejection.

"Oh!" Meng Yao grinned at Lan Xichen. "I win."

Nie Mingjue blinked. "Uh... what?"

Lan Xichen shook his head with a small smile. "Yes, yes, you win. Congratulations, A-Yao." He took pity on Nie Mingjue and explained what was going on. "We... made a bet."

"I thought there were rules about that," Nie Mingjue said, his confusion continuing to rise with every passing second.

"Mm, only in Cloud Recesses, and even then, there are more rules about being a humble winner or good loser than bets," Lan Xichen said. "Anyways, we made a bet that you would eventually ask us about the courting token you had commissioned before the war truly began. I said that you would ask after the Duanwu Festival once everything had calmed down, and A-Yao said that it would be before." He sipped at his tea. "The wager was a small cake of Jade Lotus green tea from Yunmeng."

"I... How did you know?" Nie Mingjue asked, feeling cast adrift.

"Nie-*zongzhu*, who does the accounting for the sect?" Meng Yao asked patiently.

"Uh-" Nie Mingjue scrambled to answer. "Mo Meifen and- oh. You."

"Exactly. I saw the request for three pieces of kingfisher jade come through from the artisans," Meng Yao said with a pleased smile. "It makes sense, honestly. One for you, one for Huaisang, and one for Wuxian. Though to be honest, it took me a moment to realize who yours was for, which I am rather ashamed of. Still, I'm sure the Lan elders will be pleased to have such strong ties with us since Wei Wuxian is marrying into their Clan."

Nie Mingjue froze. Did... Did Meng Yao not think he was cared for? Or perhaps he'd never realized the depth of regard Nie Mingjue actually held for him? He looked to Lan Xichen for help, but found nothing there, as the First Jade was frowning slightly.

"A-Yao, I think you may be confused," Lan Xichen said gently. "The elders have said nothing about Mingjue-*xiong* approaching them to begin negotiations for my hand. Certainly to work out those needed for Wangji and Wuxian, but nothing for me. I suspect the token is for you, and I will fully support that match. You will make a wonderful Nie-*pei'ou*."

It was Meng Yao's turn to frown at Lan Xichen with a furrowed brow. Nie Mingjue looked between them, mind whirring until it stuck on a realization like a fly in honey. Neither of them seemed to think he wanted them when he wanted both, and the fault for that lay in his hands as he hadn't said something one way or another. He buried his face in his hands, shoulders shaking as his emotions coursed through him and then overflowed.

A deep belly laugh spilled out of him, filling the room as the joyful ridiculousness of the situation overwhelmed Nie Mingjue. It got to the point where he had to pillow his head on his arms as he folded himself down to meet the table, his laughter gaining a mildly wild edge to it. The sound of the door sliding open and familiar footsteps approaching barely registered to Nie Mingjue.

"What's going on here? I can hear his laughter all the way down the hall," Nie Huaisang said from somewhere above him.

"I honestly have no idea," Meng Yao replied, sounding extremely baffled. "We were just talking about courting and-"

"Oh?" Nie Huaisang's voice went bright. "And what was the verdict?"

"He hasn't said who his token is for," Lan Xichen said. "I thought it was for A-Yao, and *he* thought it was for *me*."

"It?" The bright tone was tinged with a strangled note. "Just one?"

"Of course. He got three pieces of jade before the war began: one for you, one for Wei Wuxian, and one for himself."

"*Oh my gods. Da-ge, you need to fix this. Now.*"

Nie Mingjue felt the familiar shape of his brother's hand curl around the back of his neck, followed by a cool wave of calming spiritual energy flowing through him. He reached up and wrapped his hand around Nie Huaisang's wrist, squeezing it lightly in thanks as his laughter ebbed and then eventually faded. Nie Mingjue sat up, feeling lightheaded but joyously so.

"I'm... I'm fine, thank you, Huaisang," he said, looking at his kneeling brother with a fond smile. Nie Huaisang returned it and then rose to his feet before stepping back.

"I'll leave you three to it, shall I?" Nie Huaisang asked lightly. "I expect good news when we see each other next, *da-ge*."

"I'll do my best. Off with you."

Nie Huaisang laughed before leaving the room, shutting the door behind himself. Nie Mingjue breathed in and let it out slowly, steadying himself one last time.

“I apologize,” he began, “for both my lapse in decorum and the confusion. While you were correct in why I got the jade, Meng Yao, you were incorrect as to who they were for. I had purchased all three pieces for a matched set.”

He reached out and opened the box to reveal its contents. “My... My heart is selfish,” he said quietly, looking over the tokens. “I would like to court you both, if you'll have me. And each other, of course. I wouldn't want to force either of you into something you don't want or aren't ready for.”

Nie Mingjue knew he'd made that mistake with insisting they become sworn brothers in the last timeline, seeing it more as a way to keep Jin Guangyao in line than what it truly should have been. The room was silent after his announcement, something that had his stomach twisting unpleasantly. Nie Mingjue summoned up his courage and looked up, not sure what he would see, nor if he would be able to take the harsh reality of rejection.

Lan Xichen's face was eerily calm in the way Nie Mingjue recognized as him trying to sort through his emotions. Meng Yao was much the same, though his brow was furrowed gently as his clever mind worked through things. Nie Mingjue rose to his feet, escaping from his seat with a few quick motions.

“I'll... I'll leave you to discuss things. Come find me or send for me when you're ready,” he said before making a hasty retreat. It may not have been the most brave thing to do, but he knew that such a decision was something that needed more contemplation and working out, especially between Meng Yao and Lan Xichen. He had no idea if they were romantically attracted to one other- physically, sure, but romantically? He wasn't sure. Given how things had happened in the last timeline (or so he'd heard from Nie Huaisang), nothing had ever happened like that between them.

Nie Mingjue fetched up in one of the open air pavilions near his office, the hum of bees visiting the flowers and the songs of the birds in the pines helping to soothe his anxiety some. He settled into a meditative pose and closed his eyes, going through a set of breathing exercises that Wen Qing had suggested would help him until they could find a way to completely control or mitigate the severity and frequency of his *qi*-deviations.

He'd rather they focus on getting the Stygian Tiger Amulet- currently stored in a high security part of their treasure vault that only he could access -detached from Wei Wuxian's core and then fully destroyed. The best time to do it would be before the Crowd Hunt that autumn, so that way Jin Guangshan couldn't continue to press them about it. Nie Mingjue huffed and then shoved the thought of Jin Guangshan out of his mind. The man didn't deserve any measure of his thoughts, especially not on that day.

A half-hour or so passed before Nie Mingjue's peace was disturbed by footsteps and the gentle clearing of a throat. He opened his eyes to see Nie Lian standing in front of him, her hands folded patiently in front of her.

“Nie Lian. How can I help you?”

“Forgive me for interrupting you, Nie-*zongzhu*, but Zewu-Jun and Lianfang-Zun have requested you return to your office to finish your discussion.”

If there was one thing- and there were many -Nie Mingjue appreciated about his people, it was that they didn't press him for answers on a clearly private matter unless it was a matter of life and death. He nodded and then rose to his feet with a smooth motion.

“Thank you, Nie Lian. You can return to your duties.”

Nie Lian bowed briefly and then left him alone. Nie Mingjue ran a hand over his face before straightening his shoulders. He could do this. The worst that could happen was that they refuse his suit and they go back to being friends. Perhaps they'd be able to joke about it with time and distance.

He returned to the office with his head held high and courage gathered. Lan Xichen and Meng Yao were where he had left them, as was the box on the table. Lan Xichen set aside his tea cup and stood once the door had slid shut behind Nie Mingjue, his long legs crossing the distance between them in mere seconds.

“Ah. Nie Lian said you two wanted to finish our disc-”

The rest of Nie Mingjue's words were muffled by Lan Xichen's kiss, Baxia faintly rattling on her stand in an echo of her wielder's startled state before calming once more. The kiss was something Nie Mingjue would've expected from someone far more physically demonstrative than a Lan, though judging from Nie Huaisang's stories of how Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had acted after their reunion and marriage, perhaps not.

Lan Xichen stepped back, his eyes bright. “You,” he said calmly, as if he hadn't just unexpectedly but wonderfully kissed Nie Mingjue back into speechlessness, “are an idiot.”

“Uh-”

“I know you're a man of few words, Nie-*zongzhu*, but we do need more than one syllable,” Meng Yao said with a laugh, “though perhaps A-Huan has kissed the words out of you. I *did* try to warn him not to be so impetuous, but apparently he's been wanting to do that for quite some time.”

“Like you haven't,” Lan Xichen shot back.

“I know how to wait.” Meng Yao rose to his feet as well, one hand dipping into the box on the table as he went. “For example, he still needs to put his token on.”

Nie Mingjue blinked rapidly for a few seconds as his brain tried to catch up with what was going on. He looked down at Lan Xichen's belt, drawing in a short breath when he saw the dragon hanging there next to the Lan entry token, though far enough apart that the two wouldn't clink unnecessarily together. A quick check of Meng Yao's belt showed his dragon there as well, the golden pearl shimmering gently in the afternoon light filtering in through the rice paper covering the window.

“A-Huan, we should put this on him together.”

Nie Mingjue stood still as the two of them worked together to put the token on, Lan Xichen keeping hold of the jade piece while Meng Yao threaded the dark cord under and then around Nie Mingjue's belt. He was glad he'd decided to wear a thinner one that day as opposed to his usual broad choices, and suspected he would continue to do that unless absolutely necessary until the day of his- their -wedding.

Once Lan Xichen had slid the token through the loop at the end of the cord and then tightened it to make sure it hung securely, he stepped back. It was a slight weight against Nie Mingjue's body, small enough that it wouldn't affect him in any way, and yet he swore he could feel it with every breath he took.

“I take it this means you accept?” he asked, still feeling rather dazed. Lan Xichen didn't bother to hide his laughter behind a sleeve as Meng Yao huffed and then drew Nie Mingjue into a kiss.

Well. That certainly was one way to answer.

Chapter End Notes

Nie-pe'ou: Nie Consort. I wanted a gender-neutral term for the spouse(s) of the Nie leader since I've made the decision that they don't give a flying flip about gender in any way, shape, or form beyond a person being comfortable with who they personally decide they are, so this is what I was able to come up with. Again, I am not a native speaker whatsoever, but both Google Translate and [Yabla.com](https://yabla.com) agree on the translation, so if I've made a mistake, I welcome gentle corrections.

Game of Survival

Chapter Notes

Hey, all! Sorry it took so long to get back to this after NaNo ended. This year has been- well. You all know. Anyways! Here's like 13.5K of Wen sibling adventures. -taps tags for the fic- Just remember, everyone we love will live and be happy at the end of the fic. That's a promise I'm intending on keeping. That said:

Warnings for this chapter: minor character death, non-canon explanations of in-universe magic and its mechanics, injury of a major character, and brief non-graphic dissociative episode that's roughly a paragraph long. That starts at "Time passed in fractured flashes" and ends at "Wen Ning came back to himself".

Also, I adjusted Wen Qing's age. She is now six years older than Wen Ning, so currently he is 16 and she is ~22. This has been updated in earlier chapters. And bless my friends who know far more chemistry than I ever will for helping with a particularly thorny part of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The journey from Qinghe to Yunmeng took several days by sword rather than the usual few hours due to the heavy snow and powerful winds. Wen Qing and Wen Ning found the first of the Dafan Wen five miles away from Lotus Pier. There were only the elderly there, and signs of hasty departures in the other houses that weren't currently occupied.

"They took Wen Shan and Liu Hong just before the snows came," Uncle Four told them as he and Granny shared hot food and drink with them. "I don't know why they wanted someone so heavily pregnant to go with them, nor why they didn't take us."

"She may have been leverage for Wen Shan, and whatever they needed them for, those of your age wouldn't survive it," Wen Qing said grimly. "What did the people who took them look like? Were they wearing any sect markings?"

"They wore plain clothing, but I swear I saw a peony on one of their scabbards before they left," Granny replied, hands trembling around her cup of tea. Wen Qing reached out and gently steadied them with her own,

"We'll find them, *popo*, don't worry," she assured her, rubbing her thumbs lightly over the thin skin covering the older woman's hands. "We may have to wait until the snows ease, but we'll find them, as well as their child if it takes that long."

"And what if they come back? I thought the Jiang were supposed to be protecting us."

Wen Ning frowned. "They were supposed to be, but I don't think they expected supposed allies to come and steal people from their homes, especially not while the war was still going on."

"We'll send word to Lotus Pier," Wen Qing said. She looked up at her brother. "You know what this means, A-Ning?"

Wen Ning nodded with a grave look. "I'd hoped to not worry about it, but if the Jin are taking people who were nowhere near the war..." He shook his head. "Then it's the only way."

"What are you talking about?" Uncle Four asked.

"Uncle, I'm the only male descendant of the main line who's eligible to take up the mantle of Sect and Clan leader," Wen Ning explained gently.

"You're still a boy!"

"I'll be sixteen in the spring, Uncle, but—" Wen Ning shook his head. "I won't be alone. I'll have you and Granny and *Jiejie* and the other Dafan Wen as my advisors. I don't want to permanently go back to Nightless City unless absolutely necessary, though. It never made for a good base, anyways. It can stay as a meeting spot or whatever."

"Hm." Wen Qing sat back in her chair, thinking. "Eclipse Estate might be better. It's more central, as well."

"And it should be big enough to fit those who want to join the sect, if there are any left." Wen Ning nodded decisively. "Alright. We'll have to get it fit for habitation, but that can wait. Granny, Uncle, when the snows ease, would you be willing to go to Qinghe? We're allies with the Nie, and they'll be able to look after you while we go in search of those who've been taken from us."

"And it's closer to Qishan," Granny mused. "Where are you two going to search?"

"We know that the war prisoner villages in Qinghe and Gusu are being well-kept and those there are being cared for," Wen Qing said. "The camps in Lanling, though..." She shook her head. "We've only heard bad things. Nie-*zongzhu* and Lan-*zongzhu* have sent scouts, but the colder weather has made it harder for them to get to where they need to go. We know the location of at least one camp, so that's where we'll be headed as soon as we can."

Uncle Four sighed. "I don't like it just being the two of you, but we can pool our money together and get you some horses before you go."

"We'd have to buy them the closer we get to Lanling," Wen Ning said. "It'll be easier to travel with them once the snows start to melt."

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They left Yunmeng as early as the weather permitted, Granny, Uncle Four, and the other Wen elders traveling with a few Jiang cultivators to Qinghe while Wen Qing and Wen Ning made their way north-east toward Lanling and the valley that held Qiongqi Path and the labor camp there. They were able to purchase some swift and solid horses with what they were given by their relatives and what Nie Huaisang and Nie Mingjue had sent along with them.

When they reached a few *li* away from the camp, they tied the horses to a tree and made camp until night had firmly fallen. Wen Ning had brought along the specialty robes he'd worn during the war for scouting. He found a surprise, however, when he opened the *qiankun* pouch he'd stored the robes in. Wen Qing looked up from her trail rations at the snort of laughter her brother let out.

"Everything alright?"

“Hm? Oh, yes, it's just...” Wen Ning shook his head, a fondly amused smile curving his lips. “A-Sang sent along his own robes for you.” He held up a small note. “He apologizes if they're a little long on you, but he figured you'd get more use out of them than he would.”

“Well, how kind of him,” Wen Qing said. Wen Ning handed over the robes before turning his back and beginning to change. Wen Qing did the same, using her belt to help adjust the fit of the robes. Once the two of them were ready, they put their original clothes in their pouches before making their approach to the camp.

The camp was quiet and dark, all work halted for the night. There was a faint light coming from the overseers' cabin- likely a candle or two -and nothing from the ramshackle low building that the workers were kept in. Wen Ning led the way, using his prior knowledge of the camp to keep them out of sight of any of the guards that might have been keeping watch. Getting the door open to the workers' building was disappointingly easy, a single cheap padlock that came apart with a judicious yank at the right angle all that was keeping the prisoners inside.

Wen Ning quickly put up several silencing talismans and then used another to provide a low light that just barely illuminated his and Wen Qing's faces. There was a long moment of silence before they were all but swarmed by the missing members of their clan.

“A-Qing! A-Ning! What are you *doing* here?” the eldest member of the group, one of the siblings' paternal great aunts, asked once the hubbub had died down.

“We came here to find you, Auntie Xiaoli,” Wen Qing said. She looked around, her stomach sinking when she didn't see who she was looking for. “Are- Did Wen Shan and Liu Hong make it here?”

Wen Xiaoli shook her head, one hand covering her mouth briefly before answering. “Wen Shan died a few weeks after we got here, and Liu Hong...” She looked over at a small cot that held a swaddled bundle of cloth and thin blankets. “She didn't make it through the birth.”

Wen Qing crossed the room in a few short strides, kneeling down next to the cot. She'd never seen A-Yuan so tiny. He was barely four months old if she had her timelines right, and his face was far too thin. She looked up at Wen Ning with a steely expression of determination.

“We can't leave him here. He'll die if he stays for much longer.”

Wen Ning nodded and then took off his outer robe. “Here. Wrap him in this. It'll keep him warm and help muffle any sounds he might make.”

“Take him. We can survive, but he can't,” Wen Xiaoli said urgently. “We'll say he died and 'bury' a bundle of blankets tomorrow. His name is A-Yuan.”

“We'll get you all out of here and home soon,” Wen Ning promised as Wen Qing carefully wrapped the robe around A-Yuan and then cast a spell on him to keep him asleep until they were well away from the camp. “I... I'm going to be claiming the title of Clan and Sect head, and then we'll get everyone back where they should be.”

Wen Xiaoli smiled at him, even with tears starting to track their way down her face. “You'll be a wonderful Wen-zongzhu, A-Ning. Go. We'll be fine here until you bring us home.”

She bowed deeply to him, the others copying her motions. Even in the dim light of the talisman, Wen Qing could see that her brother was blushing, the set of his shoulders betraying his awkwardness. One of the others peeked outside the door once the light talisman was put out, and when it was safe to go, Wen Qing and Wen Ning slipped out of the building. Wen Ning reattached the lock on the door, not wanting anyone to think something had happened, and then led the way back toward their horses.

The ride to Qinghe was a vast difference than their soaked and desperate flight to the Burial Mounds. The weather remained clear and cool, the half moon lighting their way along the road. They paused for the night when they were well away from the labor camp, stopping in a town that was big enough to have an inn. A-Yuan's health was too delicate to risk having him sleep rough, especially when it wasn't necessary.

They made it to Qinghe by midday the next day, riding their horses at a moderate pace since they were well enough away from Jin territory to not have to worry as much. Wen Qing had created a makeshift sling to keep A-Yuan in and had him resting safely across her chest as they rode toward safety. The gate rose ponderously when the guards keeping watch recognized them- Wen Ning had sent a message ahead to let Nie Huaisang know that they were close when they'd paused briefly to let the horses rest a few hours prior -and they were able to ride right into the Unclean Realm once the gate was high enough.

It was with great relief that Wen Qing dismounted from her horse, her brother helping her down. A-Yuan was not happy with the movement, setting up a fuss as Nie Huaisang and several others approached the group, the latter of whom hurried over to Wen Ning and drew him into a tight hug.

"I'm so glad to see you two safe!"

"Three," Wen Qing corrected. Nie Huaisang turned his head in time to see her take A-Yuan out of the sling.

"Oh, wow! Is that-"

"This," Wen Qing said as Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, and Meng Yao joined their group, "is our cousin, A-Yuan."

"His parents?" Nie Mingjue asked. Wen Qing shook her head.

"Dead, both of them. His mother in childbirth and his father a few months ago. We don't know the exact details of his death," she replied. She looked down at A-Yuan, running a gentle finger along his thin cheek. "It's a blessing that he's survived for so long. I doubt he ever had a wet nurse, let alone any true connection to the Clan magic."

"Is there a way to fix that?" Meng Yao watched A-Yuan shift irritably in Wen Qing's arms, his focus intent on catching every movement.

"Clan magic creates the strongest connection at birth," Lan Xichen said with a soft sigh. "Even you have a connection to the Jin magic, A-Yao, because your father was alive when you were born. A-Yuan... His connection is likely gossamer-thin, and it's probably why he's been able to survive for so long. If he stayed with the other Wens as he grew, it's possible that it could strengthen. Clan magic is why most sects that are founded through bloodlines tend to specialize in certain methods of cultivation- the Lan with our music, the Nie with their sabers, and so on."

“Hm.” Wen Qing eyed Meng Yao thoughtfully. “How much experience do you have with babies?”

“Some,” Meng Yao replied. “Why?”

“Wonderful. Come here for a moment? I want to try something.”

Meng Yao did as asked, faint confusion swiftly shifting to surprise when Wen Qing carefully handed him A-Yuan. He automatically shifted his arms to the best position, used to helping out around the nursery in the Unclean Realm and, further back, in the brothel when one of the workers there had a child. A-Yuan grumbled to himself, the occasional whimper breaking through.

“I think he's hungry,” Meng Yao said. “Is... Was something supposed to happen?”

“Part of why he hasn't settled is because of the Clan magic issue,” Wen Qing explained. “Nie-*zongzhu*, will you try?”

Nie Mingjue nodded and then held his arms out to receive A-Yuan from Meng Yao. A-Yuan seemed somewhat content in his arms, though that could have also been because Nie Mingjue was warm and solid. It was when Lan Xichen held him that there was further success in A-Yuan calming, the whimpers fading and leaving only the occasional grumble.

“Hm. So the Lan Clan magic seems to be the best for now,” Wen Ning said, “though not a perfect fit. I wonder if-”

“Wen Ning! Wen Qing! You're home!”

Wei Wuxian all but bounded over, Lan Wangji following along beside him at a more sedate pace.

“It's good to see you!” Wei Wuxian continued on. “And- Xichen-*ge*, is that a *baby*?”

Lan Xichen smiled. “It is. This is A-Yuan, cousin of Wen-*yisheng* and Wen-*gongzi*. Would you like to hold him?”

“What? Oh! Can I? Is that okay?”

“Of course,” Wen Qing said, carefully not looking at her fellow time travelers as Lan Xichen helped to arrange A-Yuan in Wei Wuxian's arms.

“Ah, Lan Zhan! Look at how tiny he is!” Wei Wuxian exclaimed, letting one of A-Yuan's small hands wrap around his index finger. “He's so cute! A precious little bun.”

Lan Wangji hummed and reached up to brush his fingers gently over the top of A-Yuan's head. The moment he made contact, a silvery blue light shimmered around the three of them, lingering for several seconds before fading away. A-Yuan settled contentedly in Wei Wuxian's arms, his hungry grumbles almost fading entirely away.

“Uh... What was that?” Wei Wuxian asked, his eyes wide. “What just happened?”

Nie Huaisang laughed. “Only you, Wei Wuxian, only you,” he said, shaking his head. “You have the weirdest luck.”

“Well, I suppose it's a good thing you're already getting married,” Nie Mingjue added with a sigh.

“*Xiongzhang?*” Lan Wangji turned his focus to his elder brother. “Explain?”

“Congratulations, Wangji,” Lan Xichen said, smiling warmly, “I think you and Wei-*xiong* have been adopted.”

“Ah.” Lan Wangji looked down at A-Yuan and then up to Wei Wuxian. “Is this alright?”

“I don't think we can say no, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian said, “but- Wen Ning. Wen Qing. You have final say in all of this.”

“As long as we're allowed to be his family still, we'll leave him in your hands,” Wen Qing told him. “Besides, taking him away from you two now would be worse than leaving him back in that camp. You'll have to get a wet nurse for him. He shouldn't really be on animal milk this young, though that was likely all they were able to give him before now.”

“Of course you're allowed to be his family!” Wei Wuxian said immediately. “Besides, if things go the way they're looking, we'll officially be family in a few years anyways once Huaisang marries Wen Ning, so it hardly matters. And we'd of course want the best doctor in the world watching over A-Yuan, so clearly you have to stay as his family. It's in the *rules*, Wen Qing.”

Wen Qing rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes, so you say. He'll be Lan Yuan once everything is said and done. A good name, I think. Let's get him to the nursery so he can be properly cleaned and fed. You and Lan-*xiong* will need to stay by him for a while until everything settles.”

“How long will that take?”

“A few hours?” Wen Qing shrugged. “It varies. You'll be able to feel the tether in your golden cores soon. It's not usually as intense when people without golden cores adopt someone, but the Clan magic is still there to allow for the connection.”

“Will this affect the wedding? Will it need to be moved up?” Nie Huaisang asked. Nie Mingjue rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“I shouldn't think so,” he decided, “but we should probably figure out how to get rid of Wuxian's connection with the Seal so we can destroy it, preferably before the Crowd Hunt.”

Wei Wuxian nodded fiercely. “I don't want to hurt A-Yuan with that connection.”

“We'll start work on it soon. For now, get him to the nursery,” Nie Mingjue said. “Go take care of my nephew.”

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji hurried off as Nie Huaisang chuckled. “Just *your* nephew?”

Nie Mingjue glanced around the gathered group with an amused look. “*Our* collective nephew, I suppose, given how he'll be eventually related to all of us.” He focused on Wen Ning, his expression going more serious. He stepped back and then bowed to him just as he would a fellow sect leader. “Wen-*zongzhu*.”

“Wen-*zongzhu*,” Lan Xichen and Meng Yao echoed, Meng Yao's bow a few degrees lower than his fiances'. Wen Ning returned the bows, greeting the three men with their titles. When he'd straightened up, Wen Qing placed a hand on his arm to get his attention.

“Wen-*zongzhu*,” she said with a warm smile as she bowed to him.

“Jiejie...” Wen Ning reached out and caught her arms. “You never have to bow to me. *Never.*”

“Too late,” Wen Qing said as she straightened up. “Let’s go find Granny and the others.”

It didn’t take too long for them to find their elders. Wen Qing had to cover her smile with a hand, tears springing to her eyes as Granny and the others acknowledged Wen Ning as clan and sect leader. Her brother might be young in body, but he was far more mature in mind and soul than anyone would ever know. She knew he would be an astounding leader regardless of his knowledge of the future.

The Clan magic within the surviving Wens shifted when the elders finished recognizing Wen Ning, and even those many miles away in the various villages and camps could feel it and quietly rejoiced. The Clan magic under Wen Ruohan had been stifled and poisoned by the corruption of the Yin Iron, but even for the short few minutes Wen Ning had been Clan Head, it felt far cleaner, more easily flowing, and more balanced than it had in years.

Wen Qing allowed herself to be drawn into the celebration that quickly formed afterward, happy to let her worries about the future be set aside for the time being. Now was the time to relax and be happy.

-/-

Wen Qing had to keep the thought in mind that once the Stygian Tiger Seal was destroyed, life would likely be far easier. Jin Guangshan wouldn’t be able to hold it over Wei Wuxian’s and, by connection, the Nie Sect’s, head, and nor would he be able to use it for his own gains. The tricky part would be severing the connection between Wei Wuxian and the Seal. She’d been buried in research ever since she and Wen Ning had returned, using what books she could find in the Nie library and what they’d been able to salvage from Nightless City.

The library from Nightless City had been salvaged shortly after the final battle by the Nie, Nie Mingjue instructing his people to keep as many volumes safe as was possible. Having access to the medical texts her Clan had collected and created over the years was certainly a boon, but she didn’t know if all the collected knowledge in the world would actually help. Wen Qing sighed, setting aside the text she’d been looking through and rubbing at her temples in an effort to ease the headache that was starting to form. She leaned back in her chair and took in a steady breath, letting it out slowly as she focused on circulating her spiritual energy through her meridians.

“Wen-yisheng?”

Wen Qing mentally sighed and then opened her eyes, turning to find Mo Meifen standing in the doorway of the room she’d taken over as her study, a covered tray in her hands. A tired smile almost automatically formed at the sight of the other woman, the scent of food coming from underneath the tray’s cover making Wen Qing’s stomach rumble.

“Oh. Did I miss dinner again?”

Mo Meifen nodded as she stepped into the room. “You did,” she said, waiting for Wen Qing to clear a space on the table before setting the tray down. “I thought you might want to take a break and eat something.”

Wen Qing’s smile went lopsided. She was so used to working through her hunger as she hunted for a solution that it often didn’t occur to her to stop until she was too hungry to concentrate. Mo

Meifen had been a wonder the past few weeks, stopping by every so often to check on her well-being and make sure she actually took care of herself. Wen Qing wasn't used to people outside her family and small circle of friends doing something like that for her, so she found Mo Meifen's actions sweet, albeit a little unexpected.

"Thank you. I keep feeling like I'm missing something easy here," she said, taking the cover off the tray and setting it aside, "but I have no idea what. I-"

She paused when she saw not only the expected dishes and utensils, but a delicate pink hibiscus blossom sitting on the tray. Wen Qing reached out and brushed her fingers carefully over the soft petals, her breath catching. She looked up at Mo Meifen, her surprise getting the better of her.

"Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful," Wen Qing replied carefully, "but-"

"But?" Mo Meifen took a seat on a nearby chair, folding her hands patiently in her lap. "I would like to begin courting you, if you would be willing to have me."

Wen Qing hesitated. She'd long known she was attracted to both men and women, but she'd never really dared to have a long-term relationship when under Wen Ruohan's rule, and in the first timeline, she'd never taken Jiang Cheng up on his courting offer thanks to the complicated mess of sect politics and her people not being safe. He hadn't tried to approach her in the same way this time around, though. When Wen Qing tried to imagine herself happy at Lotus Pier as it stood at the moment, she immediately thought of having to deal with Madam Yu as a mother-in-law and instantly internally recoiled.

She didn't like the idea of having to deal with such a strong personality for a mother-in-law, especially not after the stories she'd heard of the woman from Wei Wuxian while they were in the Burial Mounds. The tales hadn't endeared the woman to Wen Qing even if Wei Wuxian had tried to couch it in things he thought were funny or would distract. Jiang Fengmian wasn't much better, even if he was pretty much the opposite of his wife.

No, Wen Qing was glad to have missed out on that this time around. She turned her thoughts to what it would be like to be with Mo Meifen. There was only about a four year or so difference between them, and Mo Meifen was a much loved and solid part of the Nie sect as one of their head treasurers and accountants. With those skills, she could go anywhere if she so wanted, even without counting her semi-noble origins.

Allowing the courting would be safe, and something new as well. Wen Qing picked up her chopsticks as she considered her answer. "I think," she said, picking up a piece of pickled carrot, "that I'd like to see A-Ning settled in as Wen-zongzhu first. I'm not saying no, but there's still so much work to do before I can truly relax."

"Wen Qing, I understand you want to help your brother as well as Wei Wuxian, but you've got to find some sort of balance in your life and care for yourself too," Mo Meifen said, reaching out and placing a hand gently on her arm. "You can't just use your whole life to serve others and not take care of yourself, even if you are a doctor."

Wen Qing went to counter the argument and then paused, something in what the other woman had said catching in her mind. "Sorry, say that again?"

“You can't use your whole life to serve others and not take care of yourself?”

“No, no, it was something about... *balance*.”

Wen Qing stuck her food in her mouth before rummaging around in the piles of books and scrolls on the table. When she found what she wanted, she carefully spread the scroll out on the table, unrolling it until she reached the part she was looking for. The diagram there showed an array with two figures kneeling in the center of the array and six figures, three in an arc on one side of the circle and three on the other, surrounding it on the outside.

Wen Qing brushed a finger over the writing next to the array, murmuring under her breath.

“Patriarch, father, brother. Matriarch, mother, sister. And there... patient and doctor. Yes, this... this could work.”

“What is it?”

Wen Qing sat back, hope starting to rise in her chest. “I think,” she said, “this is the answer to the Seal problem.”

-/-

Getting the array set up and the correct people chosen for the ritual took longer than Wen Qing liked, but when it was ready and everything triple-checked, the ritual began. In the patriarch role was Nie Mingjue, his positions of Nie-*zongzhu* making him the patriarch of the Nie clan, even if he wasn't technically the eldest. Nie Huaisang took the role of brother, and in the role of father, Fang Bohai, one of the Nie sect's weapons masters, as he had three children and a fourth on the way. Granny Wen took the role of matriarch, Meng Shi the role of mother, and Nie Lian the role of sister.

Wen Qing had contemplated putting Mo Meifen in the role of sister, but decided against it, figuring that it was likely better to have someone who had never married nor had children in the role just in case such things messed with the balance of the ritual. Nie Lian was also Wei Wuxian's sect sister, so she doubly fit the role. Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian knelt in the middle of the array, their knees protected by thin cushions.

“Everyone ready?” she asked. When she got confirmation from those around the circle, she picked up a sharp and sanitized scalpel, cutting first Wei Wuxian's palms and then hers. They waited long enough to let some blood pool before turning their hands in sync and allowing the blood to fall on the array, activating it. Wen Qing reached out and clasped Wei Wuxian's hands, his right with hers and his left with her left, crossing their arms over one another at the wrists.

She closed her physical eyes and then opened her inner ones, the network of spiritual energy flowing through the array and the people connected to it rich and colorful, all save for a sickly black tendril that ran from Wei Wuxian's core and away into the distance.

There. See it? she asked, pulling Wei Wuxian's focus away from the shimmering web of energy and to where it needed to be.

Yes, I see it. This is so *strange* , Qing- *jie* .

Wen Qing huffed. *Focus, Wei Wuxian. Look at how it's attached to your core. Even the one use was enough for it to get its hooks into you. We'll have to go slowly with this. One point of connection at a time. It will likely fight, so we'll have to be decisive. Don't let it attach again.*

Slow but decisive. Got it.

The two of them worked together, picking at the wisp-thin filaments that tried to dig their way into Wei Wuxian's core. Wen Qing wielded a bit of her own spiritual energy like a razor-sharp scalpel, cutting away the connections while Wei Wuxian created a bubble-like shield around his core that grew to encompass each point so the Seal couldn't attach again. Time both felt like it wasn't passing at all and also was draining away like grains of sand through a small hourglass, the strange liminal feel of the space as they worked surrounding them.

When the last of the filaments was disconnected and the tendril from the Seal snapped away, Wen Qing set to work helping to heal and cleanse Wei Wuxian's core as much as she could. Only when the connection points began to fade- looking more like the golden bruises on a lightly handled peach rather than black spots on a rotten banana -did she pull away, satisfied that the natural healers of time and rest (not to mention the talented musical cleansings provided by Lan Wangji) would see the last bits of damage healed.

The glow from the array faded around them, and more than one of the participants went to one knee, or, in Granny's case, slumped in their chair as their energy drained away along with the light. The doctors and healers who had been standing by just in case hurried forward, checking to make sure that no one had been unduly harmed by the ritual nor were in any danger from its after-effects. The cuts on Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian's palms had been healed during the course of the ritual, leaving only the faintest of pink marks there.

“Did it work?”

Wen Qing stirred from where she'd slumped over to rest against Wei Wuxian at Nie Huaisang's exhausted question.

“Yes.”

A ragged cheer went up at that.

“Oh good,” Nie Huaisang said. “Let's all take a long nap.”

Wen Qing laughed as she pushed herself up to a seated position. “A good nap and then we take care of the Seal.”

Later that evening, just as the sun started to set, Nie Mingjue fetched the Seal from the vault it had been safely kept in and brought it to a heavily warded cave a short distance outside the walls of the Unclean Realm. Waiting there was a curious set up, as well as the witnesses to the Seal's hopeful destruction. In the middle of the cave was a large ceramic vat that had once been destined to go to one of the local wine makers, heavy containment arrays painted neatly on the outside.

Inside the vat was a second smaller jar, surrounded by undyed cotton batting to cushion it and keep it steady. A third and final jar was nestled into it, slaked lime packed around its outside. The inside of the third jar held spirit of niter, a strong colorless acid that was often used by the farmers to help make fertilizer, among other things. The inner jar was the thinnest by design, allowing the acid to eat through it and reach the slaked lime that would then hopefully neutralize it.

The open mouth of the inner jar was warded against the harsh fumes of the acid, allowing Wei Wuxian to use his dizi to maneuver the Seal through the air and then slowly lower it down without worrying about succumbing to the noxious smell. The moment the Seal sank beneath the surface of

the acid, Nie Huaisang activated the containment array on the outside of the vat, a shimmering blue-white dome of magic surrounding the whole thing.

The small crowd- consisting of Nie Mingjue, Nie Huaisang, the two Lan brothers, Wei Wuxian, and the Wen siblings -watched in tense anticipation as smoky gray wisps of resentful energy began to escape from the top of the vat, only to be banished by the ward. Lan Wangji stood by with his guqin and Lan Xichen his xiao, both ready to play *Cleansing* should it be necessary. There was a muted crack from within the vat, the innermost jar breaking under the pressure of the resentful energy.

The ward struggled to contain the resentful energy coming from the Seal's destruction, the energy coiling and writhing like a nest of snakes. Lan Wangji began playing his guqin, his practiced fingers deftly picking out a calming tune. Lan Xichen followed suit, joining in the melody in a seamless accompaniment. The resentful energy struggled against the music, the color fading from a dark ashen gray to a pale dove hue and then, with one last desperate push against the ward, faded completely.

"Is it destroyed?" Wen Ning asked. Wei Wuxian played a few short bars on his dizi and then waited.

"I think so," he said, giving the vat a thoughtful look. "Now all we have to do is figure out what to do with all of this."

"The cave will be warded in layers and sealed against anyone trying to enter," Nie Mingjue replied. He led the way out, waiting until everyone was standing outside the cave before drawing Baxia and settling into a solid stance. Nie Huaisang placed a hand on his back, spiritual energy shimmering between them. Baxia began to glow a dull green-gray color, the intensity slowly building until it lanced out and connected with the stone around the cave mouth.

It spread out, covering the entrance and sealing it off. Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji replicated it, adding a second layer to the ward. Only when Wen Qing and Wen Ning added their own layer did Nie Huaisang and Nie Mingjue make the final tweak to the ward, making it look as solid and as rock-like as the rest of the mountain. It was much like the ward for the Cold Cave, though with three different sects involved, it was far less prone to failing entirely.

"There. *Now* it's finished," Nie Mingjue said. "Wei Wuxian, if you *ever* get a harebrained idea for an invention like that again, I'm going to make you do training with Fang Bohai until you pass out and can't move for a *month*."

"Don't worry, *da-ge*, I won't stop you," Wei Wuxian assured him.

"Good, because I don't want to have to be that intimately acquainted with your core ever again," Wen Qing added. "Well, now that that's done, we can all go get food and talk about what's to happen next."

There was a murmur of agreement from the others before they returned to the city proper, leaving the broken remains of the Tiger Seal to stay locked away from the world as they should have been long ago.

-/-

Wen Ning stood as still as he could, feeling more than a little ridiculous as he waited for the tailor to make the final alterations on the robes that Nie Huaisang had commissioned for him to wear at

the discussion conference that was due to happen a month before the Crowd Hunt. It was taking place in Lotus Pier, and it would be the first official event Wen Ning would be attending in his role as Wen- *zongzhu* . Jiang Fengmian and Jin Guangshan were well aware that he'd taken up the role, as he'd sent out an official announcement not long after just so no one could say he hadn't informed anyone.

The work on Eclipse Estate was coming along nicely. It had been closed up properly, the wards keeping things clean and mostly dust free. Supplies like linens and other fabric-based things had been purchased at various markets, leaving only the mattresses for the beds to be bought and then delivered. The Wen soldiers who had been taken to the camps in Yunmeng, Gusu, and Qinghe had all been talked to and polled to see who wanted to return to Qishan and who wanted to stay in the villages under the auspices of their controlling sects and a magical oath never to take up arms against said sects and their allies unless in self-defense.

Most, upon hearing that it was Wen Ning who was now their leader, had agreed to return to Qishan, though they'd been warned that life there would be nothing like it was under Wen Ruohan. Those that didn't want to return made their oaths and stayed in the villages they'd been living in for the past few months, content not to have to worry about fighting ever again unless to defend their lives, a luxury few of them had possessed.

The soft sound of a contented baby cooing and mumbling to himself caught Wen Ning's attention. He glanced over, smiling when he saw A-Yuan being cared for by Nie Huaisang and Meng Yao, the latter of whom was holding the baby and looking very content with the situation even if it meant he was only able to do some of his paperwork with one hand. It was amazing to think that Jin Ling wouldn't be the only one with too many uncles if all went well.

A-Yuan would eventually have all five Great sect leaders as uncles once Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng rose to power, not to mention two high ranking consorts and, of course, the various male members of the Lan and Nie sects. He'd have plenty of aunts, cousins, and sect-relatives as well, a stark difference from the only child Wen Ning had once known who'd been held somewhat distant because of who his father had been. He just hoped that A-Yuan would grow up into the same kindhearted and wonderful young man he had been in the prior timeline. Given who his parents now were, though, Wen Ning had little doubt he would, even with all the differences he might experience in his life.

“Alright, Wen-*zongzhu*, we're all done,” the tailor announced, bringing Wen Ning out of his thoughts of the future. “Nie-*gongzi*, Meng-*zhushou*, what do you think?”

Nie Huaisang got up and then did a circuit around Wen Ning, looking the robes over with a critical eye. The top robe was a warm copper, the tone carefully picked to ensure that it wasn't garish nor would wash Wen Ning's skin tone out. The hem, cuffs, collar, lapel, and sash were all black, providing crisp and simple borders. The under robe was black as well, allowing it to be used in other outfits if needed. The only red in the entire outfit were the clusters of asters that had been carefully embroidered on the sleeves, one neat line curling elegantly up and over Wen Ning's left shoulder and ending right over his heart with the final aster considerably larger than the others.

The aster had been chosen as a distinct counter to the former Wen sun, and was visually different enough from the Jin peony that seeing it on a banner or in the sky as a flare wouldn't cause confusion. It was also one of the fifty fundamental herbs used by doctors, so it served as a reminder that the Wens were now mainly focused on medicine and bettering others, not just themselves. Or at least, that was what they had hoped for by choosing that particular flower.

“Hm.” Nie Huaisang came to a halt in front of Wen Ning with a thoughtful expression. “How does it feel?”

“Good. I feel like I can move enough to fight if need be,” Wen Ning said, carefully testing out his range of motion. “Nothing's too constricting, and the sleeves aren't too big, either.”

“But big enough to handle the *qiankun* enchantments?”

Meng Yao joined them, A-Yuan held securely in his arms.

“Yes, Meng-*zhushou*,” the tailor confirmed; his daughter, who was acting as his assistant, nodded from where she stood nearby. “We had our best embroiderers do the work, the same ones who did the asters.”

Meng Yao nodded in approval. “They did very good work,” he said. “I can't see any problem with them, and if Wen- *zongzhu* is happy with them, then that's that. Thank you for your work, Tian-*caifeng* .”

The tailor and his daughter left the room with a bow. Wen Ning nodded.

“So,” he said, “do I look like a Clan leader?”

“You do,” Nie Huaisang confirmed with a lopsided smile, “even if I wish you didn't have to take on the responsibility so soon.”

Wen Ning gently took A-Yuan from Meng Yao, cuddling his cousin close. A-Yuan yawned as he snuggled in to take a nap.

“I wish it could be different too, but if I want to keep my family and Clan safe, not to mention repair the damage Wen Ruohan did to the sect, I've got to do what needs to be done. We can't take the easy route with this.”

-/-

Stepping into the banquet hall at Lotus Pier with his sister at his side and the support of three of his fellow Great Sect leaders was nonetheless nerve-racking for Wen Ning when the time came. He kept his head held high, trying to summon all the confidence he could as Jiang Fengmian greeted him, Jiang Cheng standing nearby in his role as Sect heir. Once the initial greetings were made, a servant led Wen Ning and Wen Qing to the table set aside for them before leaving them be to get settled in.

Wen Qing was in robes of a similar cut and color to her brother's, though her sleeves were cut closer to her arms as she often preferred. The asters were embroidered along the lines of her collar and cuffs, picked out on the black borders in copper-colored thread that shimmered faintly in the lantern light. Wen Ning could head the mutterings of the other sect leaders as he and his sister took their places by their table but ignored them, knowing they wouldn't lessen until they were proven worthy, and even then, only by enough to have a thin veneer of civility.

The two of them stayed on their feet, even though only Wen Ning needed to do so in order to properly greet those who came to say hello. He appreciated his sister's support, however, especially when it came to dealing with those who looked down on him for his youth and inexperience. He put on a particularly neutral smile when Jin Guangshan arrived to speak with him.

“Ah, Wen-gongzi! It's good to see you so well! And your lovely sister too, of course.”

“We have indeed been blessed with good health and fortune,” Wen Ning said calmly, “but I'm afraid I must correct you, Jin-zongzhu. I have been properly confirmed as Clan and Sect leader. The Clan magic has settled without rancor on my shoulders, and I will do my best to bear that weight with the honor and humility it deserves.”

“But you're still so young,” Jin Guangshan said with a falsely solicitous smile. “Are you sure you're up for the task?”

“I'm barely a year younger than your own heir,” Wen Ning pointed out. “Besides, I will have a council of elders to help guide me, as well as my fellow sect and clan leaders. Of course, I'm not the only young Sect leader here. Lan-zongzhu and Nie-zongzhu are only six or so years older than I am, after all. I am happy to listen to constructive advice.” He bowed to Jin Guangshan. “If you will excuse me, Jin-zongzhu, I would like to go greet some of the others before the conference starts.”

He stepped away from Jin Guangshan, Wen Qing following after him as they crossed the hall.

“Good job,” Wen Qing murmured. “Polite but not too deferential. I liked the touch of having your fellow sect and clan leaders helping to 'guide' you.”

“Thank you.” Wen Ning smiled when he saw Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji entering the hall. He waited until they had said their hellos to Jiang Fengmian and Jiang Cheng before going to greet them.

“Lan-zongzhu. Hanguang-Jun.”

He bowed to them, a truly warm smile on his face as he straightened up. Lan Xichen returned it, and Lan Wangji nodded companionably to the two of him. Wen Ning noticed the black jade rabbit token hanging from the latter's belt, his smile going faintly amused. It appeared that the betrothal gifts had finally started to be exchanged. After everything that had happened between the two of them, both in the former timeline and the current one, Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian deserved their happiness.

“Wen-zongzhu. Wen-yisheng. How are you finding the Discussion Conference?” Lan Xichen asked.

“Well, it's not so bad so far, but we'll have to see how things go once the talks get started,” Wen Ning replied.

“Good. We saw the Nie contingent in the market not long before we got here. They should be here shortly,” Lan Xichen told them. Wen Ning perked up at that. He wasn't the only one, though the Twin Jades were far more subtle about their excitement.

It wasn't too long until the Nie representatives arrived, looking resplendent in the dark blues and slate grays of their sect. Wei Wuxian stood out with the deep red ribbon in his hair and white jade rabbit token at his belt, though he wasn't helped by his enthusiastic wave at Lan Wangji when he saw his fiancé. Lan Wangji let out an affectionate sigh of exasperation before going to meet him halfway.

“You'd think it's been years since they've seen one another rather than a week,” Wen Qing said dryly.

“Yes, well, at least we know that their love for one another is solid even though they've had to wait several years before they can get married,” Lan Xichen replied.

“True. I-”

Wen Ning paused when Jiang Fengmian's voice rang out from the front of the room, turning to face the older sect leader as he spoke.

“Welcome, everyone! Please, find your seats and we can begin the conference.” Jiang Fengmian took a seat on the lotus throne, Jiang Cheng and Madam Yu at their own tables on either side of it. Wen Ning returned to his table, Wen Qing taking her seat next to him. It was strange to think that in a few years' short time, it would be Nie Huaisang sitting next to him and Wen Qing would be at their backs with the other disciples, but it was also thrilling in its own right.

Things started off well enough, with reports from the various sect leaders and how they and their people were recuperating now that several months had passed since the war had ended. Wen Ning kept quiet, sure someone would question his and his sister's presences soon enough. His prediction proved correct when Sect Leader Yao spoke up, his boisterous voice carrying easily through the room.

“Excuse me, but why do the Wen even have a seat at this conference? It was their clan and sect that started this whole mess! Besides, the boy is too young to be sect leader. Surely there's been some sort of mistake.”

Wen Ning sighed to himself but rose to his feet regardless, bowing politely in Sect Leader Yao's direction. “As I informed Jin-*zongzhu* earlier, I have been confirmed in my role as Wen-*zongzhu* by peer, by blood, and by elder. The Clan magic has settled under my control without problem. We will, of course, continue to pay the appropriate reparations to the sects and clans we have made offense against, but it will not be for eternity. I recognize the misdeeds and crimes of Wen Ruohan and will endeavor to repair what I can. I intend to return the Wen back to our roots, particularly with a focus on medicine and aid to the civilians we are supposed to protect.”

He turned his focus to Jiang Fengmian. “Speaking of, Jiang-*zongzhu*, I would be honored if we could meet and discuss the issue of the Burial Mounds and attempts at cleansing it, as it is between our territories and should have been dealt with long ago.”

That caused another round of murmurs, though Wen Ning swore there was more of an approving undertone. The Burial Mounds had long been a source of contention between the Wen and the Jiang, even if it was closer to the latter. All former efforts to get Wen Ruohan to help with the area had been ignored, and Wen Ning had to wonder if it wasn't because the Mounds were such a good source of resentful energy and corpses. It was a blessing Wen Ruohan hadn't thought to militarize the corpses and spirits lingering there at any point.

“I would gladly do so,” Jiang Fengmian said with a genial nod. Wen Ning returned the nod and then sat down. He glanced over at Jin Guangshan, who didn't seem too pleased with how well he was being received by the other sect leaders. Wen Ning mentally sighed and then made a note to pull the other Great Sect leaders into a private meeting at some point during the conference to act as witnesses when he confronted Jin Guangshan about releasing those still held at the labor camps.

The conference continued apace from there. Wen Ning settled in to listen and add his own opinions, Wen Qing taking concise but thorough notes in her personal shorthand. He got his chance to gather

the other Great Sect leaders into a small group during one of the lulls in the conference later that afternoon, the four of them gathering on one of the pavilions overlooking the water.

Wen Qing stayed behind in the main hall at her own wish, wanting to give Wen Ning an opportunity to stand on his own among his equals and not make it look like she was feeding him the answers. She also wanted to speak to Nie Huaisang about a few things, though she refused to tell Wen Ning what, exactly, said things were. Wen Ning didn't push, content in the knowledge that he'd likely learn about it eventually.

When everyone was settled around a low table in the middle of the pavilion, Wen Ning turned his attention to Jin Guangshan. "Jin-*zongzhu*, I would like to talk to you about something important," he said, folding his hands in his lap.

"Of course, of course! What is it, Wen-*gongzi*?"

Wen Ning pushed aside the annoyance at the blatant incorrect title that sprung up in his chest, knowing Jin Guangshan was doing it to provoke him and prove that he wasn't fit for his new position. Instead, he squared his shoulders and smiled neutrally.

"Since I have taken over the role as Wen-*zongzhu*, I would like to negotiate the return of my people from your custody," he said. "I have already worked with our esteemed colleagues here to secure the return of those they watched over during and after the war. Not all chose to return to Qishan, but that was their choice. Those who remain in the villages in Gusu, Qinghe, and Yunmeng have sworn oaths of peace, but they have been left room to defend themselves if necessary. I would like to negotiate the same sort of deal with you, although..."

"Although?" Jin Guangshan prompted when Wen Ning trailed off.

"There have been disturbing rumors about the conditions in which my people are being held," Wen Ning continued on. "I would like to verify them for myself and make sure that they are being treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. They may have been your enemies, but they are still human beings. Maybe we could arrange something within the coming days? I know you're busy with arranging the Crowd Hunt this coming autumn. If you're not available yourself, I would be happy to work with Jin Zixuan regarding this. After all, as your heir, he speaks with your voice and authority, doesn't he?"

"My nephew, Jin Zixun, has been overseeing the encampments your... people are being held in," Jin Guangshan said, waving a dismissive hand. "Jin Zixuan has no hand in their care."

"Then your nephew will be the best for me to work with," Wen Ning said firmly.

"Indeed," Nie Mingjue chimed in. "I would be happy to go with you, Wen-*zongzhu*, to help you assess the camps and move your people back to Qishan."

"As can the Lan," Lan Xichen added pleasantly. "We can get all of this taken care of well before the Crowd Hunt, which will take the burden off you, Jin-*zongzhu*. After all, what better way to start a new season than with a lessening of worries?"

"Hm. It is a good idea," Jiang Fengmian agreed. "It would free funds, supplies, and manpower from having to maintain the camps, Jin-*xiong*, that can be diverted to other projects. You mentioned wanting more available funds for the wedding, right?"

Jin Guangshan's expression went rather stiff at Jiang Fengmian's words. It was clear he'd been expecting support from his fellow older Sect Leader, and so was thrown by the shift in the balance.

"You're right," he said begrudgingly. "I'll have Jin Zixun speak with you later today and arrange for you and your party to visit the camps at Qiongqi Path and near Langya."

"And any prisoners you might have in Lanling?" Nie Mingjue prompted. "They will be properly evaluated and tried for their crimes if they have truly committed any, of course. We wouldn't want justice to slip through the cracks just because of lingering resentment due to the war."

"I will have to review our records," Jin Guangshan said, taking refuge in distracting half-answers. "Now then, is there anything else the four of us need to discuss while we're here? I doubt the others will be content with the recess from the greater conference for much longer."

Nie Mingjue glanced at Wen Ning, who subtly flicked his fingers in a negative motion, and then nodded faintly. "Very well. I have nothing that can't be addressed during the remainder of the conference."

"Neither do I," Lan Xichen said, Jiang Fengmian echoing him shortly after.

"Nor I."

Jin Guangshan rose to his feet at Wen Ning's confirmation, flicking his sleeves back. "Wonderful. I'll go speak with Jin Zixun."

He strode off without so much as a goodbye, leaving the four of them behind. Nie Mingjue shook his head once Jin Guangshan was out of sight and earshot.

"I don't think I'll ever understand him," he said.

"I've known him for over thirty years and I still have trouble understanding him," Jiang Fengmian said in a rare show of exasperation toward his fellow Sect Leader. "I can only thank the gods that his son is nothing like him."

"Jin Zixuan is a good man," Lan Xichen agreed. "I believe he sees the faults of his father and tries to not develop them himself."

"A good plan, as I don't think Jiang-*guniang* would stand for it," Nie Mingjue joked lightly, earning a pleased smile from Jiang Fengmian.

"A-Li is much like me in temperament, but she has her mother's fire and steel where it counts," he said proudly. "She'll make a fine wife for him soon enough, and later, an even better mother."

The conversation that followed lasted until they had to return to the main hall to resume the conference, lightening spirits and encouraging laughter, especially between the younger clan leaders. Wen Ning was grateful for it, especially when the conference began again and the day once more got bogged down in political bickering and vexingly boring minutiae.

The conference lasted two more days, and it took that long for Wen Ning to arrange to talk to Jin Zixun, as the annoying man proved to be frustratingly elusive. When the conversation did finally happen, Jin Zixun was barely civil and rather dismissive of Wen Ning's position and request. His laziness, however, won out against him, and he wrote out a missive signed and stamped with his

personal seal that he gave to Wen Ning to show the foremen at the camps. It would make things far easier than Wen Ning had thought, or so he hoped.

He wasted little time after the conference ended, gathering wagons and supplies to help move their people before taking his sister and a small contingent of Nie disciples with them to Qiongqi Path. Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang accompanied them as well, adding a weight to their presence that left the Jin soldiers little room to refuse their demands to release the prisoners. It felt amazing to empty the camp in the middle of the rich summer daylight, gathering their lost family members into the wagons for the ride back home.

The twenty unmarked graves at the bottom of the nearby cliffs were grimly noted and plans for a memorial to be erected at a later date tentatively drafted up. For now, the dead would have to be remembered with a group memorial tablet until their individual names could be carved into their own tablets and placed into the ancestral hall at Eclipse Estate. Wen Ning and Wen Qing had debated long and hard about having Wen Ruohan's tablet in the ancestral hall, but in the end, they'd had one made and then promptly put it in the place of least importance, as was befitting such a vile man. The tablets for Wen Xu and Wen Chao were put in their proper places, however, because while they hadn't been the best of people, they had never truly gotten to the heights of malice and destruction they'd managed as adults in the prior timeline.

Once the camp had been emptied and the former occupants sent on their way toward Qinghe- and eventually, Qishan -Wen Ning and the others moved on to the camp near Langya. There were fewer people there, though far more than either Wen sibling liked. The camp near Langya hadn't existed before, or at least, it hadn't to their knowledge. Then again, they'd been focused more on their survival and then that of the members of the Qiongqi Path camp the last time around, so they could be somewhat excused for not knowing everything that had been going on in the wider world at that time.

Wen Ning breathed a sigh of relief once all the remnants of his clan were safe behind the walls of the Unclean Realm, the doctors there helping them to recover from their ordeals over the next few weeks. The preparations to make Eclipse Estate ready for habitation concluded two weeks before the Crowd Hunt was due to begin, allowing its new inhabitants to move in and get settled in plenty of time. It felt strange to Wen Ning not to be in the Unclean Realm and be able to take meals with Nie Huaisang whenever either of them liked.

The Unclean Realm was only a few hours away by sword, so they weren't entirely torn apart. They also had their communication journals, and Wen Ning found himself checking his and responding to Nie Huaisang's comments at least twice a day, if not more. He knew they would see one another soon at the Crowd Hunt, and couldn't wait to be able to talk to him in person.

Traveling to Phoenix Mountain was a new experience, as Wen Ning had been in the labor camp by then and Wen Qing desperately looking for him in the prior timeline. Now they were heading to the Hunt by horse, a small group of attendants and disciples- what few had joined or, in some cases, rejoined the sect in the past few weeks as the news spread through Qishan -accompanying them. They left Qishan with plenty of time to get to the mountain, arriving the evening before the Hunt was to start.

They were among some of the last to arrive, with only some of the minor sects arriving after them. Magic aided in setting up their tents in their assigned spot- three in total -leaving the Wen contingent free to do as they liked for the evening not long after they arrived. It didn't take long

before Wen Ning and Wen Qing had led their group to join in on the mixed group gathering for dinner in the makeshift dining area under one of the largest open-air canopies.

Wen Ning immediately claimed a spot next to Nie Huaisang, earning a broad smile from him and a gentle nudge of the shoulder.

“Have a good trip?” he asked as Wen Ning started putting food on his plate from the communal serving dishes.

“We did. The weather held nicely,” Wen Ning said. “Hopefully it won't turn to rain any time soon.”

“Hopefully,” Nie Huaisang agreed. “Excited for the hunt?”

“It'll be interesting to see. I haven't been on many big night hunts like this one before.”

Nie Huaisang idly fanned himself, the metal decorations on Lengfeng glinting in the lantern light. “Hopefully no one will get seriously injured. I mean, we've got some of the best doctors here, especially with your sister around, but still.”

Wen Ning hummed in agreement, watching with pride as the people he'd brought with him were near-seamlessly integrated into the mixed Nie and Lan group, Wei Wuxian leading the way with stories that had even some of the more stringently rule-abiding Lans hiding laughter in their sleeves from time to time. It was good to see him so happy and not mired down by the weight of resentful energy and worries about the future. Lan Wangji was at his side as usual, deftly moving teacups and water glasses out of the way of his fiancée's exuberant gestures.

“He looks happy, doesn't he?”

“He does,” Wen Ning said, “and all the better for it. I never want to see him like *that* again.”

“We've done our best to make sure of it.” Nie Huaisang shook his head. “Unless something drastic happens, he won't ever have to worry about it. I'm pretty sure *da-ge* would whack him upside the head with the flat of Baxia's blade if he did something so foolish.”

Wen Ning huffed out a laugh and then turned his attention to his food, letting the chatter of the others wash over him as he ate. When he was done with his food, he sat back and nursed a cup of tea, leaning in against Nie Huaisang as much as he could get away with.

“Where's A-Yuan?”

“Hm? Oh, under the care of his wet nurse at the moment,” Nie Huaisang replied after a moment's thought. “They're staying in the Nie tents for now. *Da-ge* wasn't sure it was a good idea to bring him, but Wei-*di* didn't want to leave him behind, even if only for a few days. He slept most of the ride over.” He laughed. “I would say he's a true Nie, but...” He shook his head. “Oh well. He'll be a Lan through and through in the end.”

“One of the best.”

As the meal wound down, Wen Ning and Nie Huaisang slipped away into the darkness to steal a little private time together. They walked through the camps, staying well away from where the hunting grounds started. Occasionally they would step into the shadows and steal a kiss or two

when time and chance allowed. Eventually, though, they returned to their respective tents, Wen Ning falling asleep with a pleased smile on his face.

The morning of the Hunt dawned cool but clear. Wen Ning dressed with both the weather and day's events in mind, opting for a set of robes with close-cut sleeves that allowed him to easily shoot a bow and draw his sword as needed. He made sure all of his equipment was ready before leaving the tent, handing his strung bow and filled quiver to an attendant with a murmur of thanks.

Wen Qing had beaten him to breakfast, sitting in a small group with Jiang Yanli, Mianmian, and a few other women in their age group from the other sects. Wen Ning was happy to see his sister making and keeping friends, especially as she hadn't really had the chance to do it before. It was a vulnerability neither of them had dared to allow when they'd lived under Wen Ruohan's thumb, and one they'd not had the chance to explore while living in the Burial Mounds.

Wen Ning ate a lightweight but otherwise filling breakfast, not wanting to fill up and be too sluggish for the hunt. The camps turned into a hive of activity as the sects got ready for the opening ceremonies, with the Wen camp being one of the more relaxed given their smaller size. Wen Ning would be leading his group in the opening ceremonies, the only sect leader to do so. The other sect leaders were to watch from the stands in comfort. He didn't mind being the odd one out; in fact, he suspected it would be that way for quite some time.

The sects entered the ceremony area with all the pomp and circumstance they could muster, flowers raining down around them from the audience members sitting in the stands. Wen Ning came to a halt between Nie Huaisang and Jin Zixuan, the others in his group arraying themselves neatly behind him. They turned to listen as one of the Jin assistants spoke about the rules of the hunt. All in all, a reasonable set of rules, though when the assistant mentioned a special activity that had been organized for the guests' delight, Wen Ning felt a frisson of unease shiver through him.

That unease turned to anger when he saw seven people in irons and chains be led out to stand before the targets, all dressed in Wen red. The targets were barely taller than some of the prisoners, and making a shot to land without harming anyone would take great skill. Wen Ning only registered that he was moving when the Jin guards watching over the prisoners tensed, one even going so far as to ready himself to draw his sword in preparation of defending himself.

"JIN GUANGSHAN!" Nie Mingjue roared, startling those near him. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing? Release them right now!"

"Calm yourself, Nie Mingjue," Jin Guangshan said. "They're perfectly fine so long as the archers strike true."

Wen Ning skidded to a halt in front of the prisoners, all of whom were watching him with wary hope. Behind him, he heard a whistle- one high note, one low, and another high -that he recognized as a Nie battle signal to fall back. He glanced back to see the Nie protectively surrounding his disciples and then all retreating save for Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian. The two of them made their way over, swords in hand. Lan Wangji signaled for the Lans to move away as well, his expression one of grim anger. Jiang Cheng glared up at Jin Guangshan and stalked off, not waiting to see if his fellow sect members followed. They did, leaving only the Jin on the field.

"We agreed to a peaceful hunt, Jin Guangshan!" Jiang Fengmian insisted. "You can't use prisoners as incentive to make a good shot!"

“They're *criminals*,” Jin Guangshan retorted. “All of them. Besides, it's not like I'm *executing* them.”

“Criminals?” Lan Xichen asked. “I've seen no trials for them, nor heard of any coming from Lanling. What are their crimes except for having the family name of Wen?”

Wen Ning turned away from the other sect leaders as they argued and focused on the guards. “Where are the keys?” he demanded. “Release them right now.”

“We don't have the keys!” one of the guards piped up. “Jin-*er-gongzi* has them!”

Wen Ning took in a breath and let it out, trying to keep his temper. “Then go get *him*,” he snapped, gesturing sharply behind him in the Jin contingent's general direction. “We're not moving until you do.”

Before the guard could fetch Jin Zixun, several things happened in quick succession. Nie Huaisang moved in front of one of the prisoners to investigate the locks on her manacles, and as he did so, there was the twang of a bowstring being fired and the sharp whistle of an arrow flying through the air. Wen Ning had barely started to turn toward the sound when Nie Huaisang had the breath punched out of him, a surprised grunt leaving him as he stumbled forward against the woman he'd been trying to help.

Time passed in fractured flashes after Wen Ning realized what had happened: his own voice shouting - pandemonium erupting - Nie Huaisang's blood on his hands - Jin Zixuan holding his sword against the side of his cousin's neck as Jin Zixun stood there in only somewhat genuine shock, his bow falling carelessly to the ground - Wen Qing's firm voice in his ear - Nie Huaisang being hustled off to the main medical tent, pale and bleeding-

Wen Ning came back to himself when he felt a damp cloth gently dabbing at his blood-stained hands. He blinked once, twice, three times to find Jiang Yanli kneeling in front of him as she worked. He wasn't sure where he was or how he had gotten there, but it was mostly quiet and he was sitting down, a blessing given that he wasn't sure he could reliably stand. Jin Zixuan stood guard nearby, his expression shifting between anger and helplessness.

“Wh- what happened? Where's A-Sang?”

“Being tended to by your sister,” Jiang Yanli said, pausing in her work to cradle his hands in hers. “You're in the secondary medical tent while they work on him in the primary. You've been... distant for a while.”

“As for what happened,” Jin Zixuan said, his voice tight, “my cousin got impatient and decided to try and make his shot while everyone was busy arguing. He swears he was aiming for the target, but given where A-Sang was hit, I highly doubt it.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, his tense posture pulling at the fine fabric of his robes. “It's been an hour at most. The Nie are watching over your people while you and your sister are... busy.”

“And Jin Zixun? What's going to happen with him?”

“I don't know. Father will likely make that decision, but-” Jin Zixuan shook his head. “I doubt Chifeng-Zun will accept anything less than corporal punishment, if not outright banishment,

depending on what happens with A-Sang. It's a giant tangled mess, and my brotherhood with A-Sang isn't helping matters.”

“It's helped a lot, actually,” Wen Ning said as Jiang Yanli began cleaning his hands again. He didn't try to hide the fine trembling, too weirdly keyed up to bother. He felt oddly detached, but knew one crumb of news about his beloved would send him crashing back to the ground again. “What are the other sect leaders doing?”

“My father is in discussions with Zewu-Jun and Chifeng-Zun,” Jiang Yanli said, rinsing out the cloth in a bowl of clear water in an attempt to cleanse it. The water immediately became tinged with pink, making Wen Ning's stomach turn unpleasantly. He looked away, doing his best not to vomit.

“I don't know what the other sect leaders are doing,” she continued on, “but doubtless they're waiting to see how this all falls out.”

“Vultures,” Jin Zixuan spat. “And I know, my father's the biggest vulture of them all. I'm going to have a lot of work to do to repair our reputation when I finally become sect leader. I-”

He broke off when the tent flap was pushed back and Nie Zonghui entered, looking drained.

“My apologies for interrupting,” he said, “but Wen-*zongzhu*, you're needed by the other Great Sect leaders.”

“He's in no fit state to worry about that!” Jiang Yanli tried to protest. “Look at him! He's as pale as a ghost.”

Wen Ning laughed roughly before carefully taking the cloth from her. He scrubbed hard at his hands, washing away the worst of the blood before letting his spiritual energy surge over his skin to take care of the rest.

“Thank you for your help, Jiang-*guniang*,” he said, heaving himself to his feet. He paused, his vision swimming briefly before it settled once more. “I have strength enough for this, I think.”

“I'll go with you,” Jin Zixuan immediately offered. “I should be there anyways. A-Li, would you go find Mianmian and mother and tell them where I'll be?”

“Of course,” Jiang Yanli said, standing up as well. “Take care of him, alright?”

“I will,” Jin Zixuan promised. “Are you ready, Wen-*zongzhu*?”

“As ready as I'll ever be,” Wen Ning said. The two of them followed Nie Zonghui out of the tent, Jiang Yanli leaving as well not long after. Jiang Fengmian, Jin Guangshan, and Lan Xichen were waiting for them in the Jin leader's large personal tent. Jin Guangshan didn't look remotely worried about what had happened, while Lan Xichen and Jiang Fengmian were both tense.

“Ah, there you are! And where is Nie Mingjue?” Jin Guangshan asked when he noticed their arrival.

“Nie-*zongzhu* is where he is needed most right now, Jin-*zongzhu*,” Nie Zonghui said calmly, something Wen Ning envied, as he himself felt like he could shake apart at any second if touched

or spoken to in the wrong way. “I stand in his stead as his second in command and speak with his authority.”

“Very well.”

Jin Guangshan took a seat at a nearby table, gesturing for the others to join him. There wasn't enough room for all of them to have their own side, leaving Wen Ning to sit next to Nie Zonghui. He thought it fitting, however, and didn't complain.

“So, let's begin with the most important issue,” Jin Guangshan said. “What news do we have of Nie-gongzi?”

“Nothing yet. He's still under the care of Wen-yisheng and the other doctors.” Nie Zonghui sat ramrod straight, the hilts of his twin sabers peeking over his shoulders serving as a reminder of his prowess as a warrior. “Nie Clan will be seeking reparations, but what that may look like is dependent on how Nie-gongzi recovers. What I do know is that Jin Zixun is no longer welcome at any event hosted by the Nie, no matter how important. He will only be admitted to the Unclean Realm if his life is in danger, nothing less.”

“That's a little harsh, don't you think?” Jin Guangshan asked. “Sure, he was foolish to do what he did, but Nie-gongzi shouldn't have been there in the first place.”

Wen Ning felt himself soar through the maelstrom of anger and out the other side to the obsidian-sharp clarity of arctic rage that lay beyond.

“What shouldn't have happened in the first place was you lying to me,” he said, his voice deadly calm. “You said you didn't have any other members of my clan or sect in your custody, and yet here you are, using seven of them as *entertainment*. They will be returning to Qishan with me no matter what you say their crimes are. I will determine if they are guilty of anything and punish or pardon them accordingly. Had you not lied, none of this would have happened, Jin-zongzhu. Once I've talked to them and know how they've been treated under your... 'care', we can reopen talks of reparations between our clans. For now, the only Jin I'll accept in Eclipse Estate is your son, as he's the only one who's proven himself worthy of my trust.”

He got to his feet, forcing back the wave of nausea the sudden movement caused. “Excuse me. I suddenly find myself unwilling to spend more time with someone who would lie baldly to my face.”

Wen Ning swept out of the tent, eventually finding himself in the Nie camp. He located the largest tent, hesitated, and then brushed his fingers over the notification array embroidered to one side of the tent flap. Meng Yao answered after a short pause, his clothes faintly rumpled.

“Oh, Wen-zongzhu. Are- Do you have any news?”

Wen Ning mutely shook his head. Meng Yao looked him over and then stepped back, holding the tent flap open.

“Come on in. You look like you're about to fall over.”

Wen Ning moved into the tent, breathing a quiet sigh of relief when the tent flap closed. Nie Mingjue was resting on a thick bedroll, blankets mounded around him until only his head was

peeking out. He propped himself up on an elbow, the blankets falling away and pooling around his torso.

“Wen Ning? Is everything alright?”

“I should be asking you that,” Wen Ning said, his determination to keep moving swiftly draining away. “What happened?”

Nie Mingjue huffed out a sharp laugh. “What do you think?” he asked. “The doctors say I’ll be fine if I rest, but it’s hard to do that when we haven’t heard anything about Huaisang in a while.”

“It’s only been an hour, Mingjue,” Meng Yao said. “Judging from where the arrow hit, it may be longer. We just have to wait.”

Nie Mingjue grumbled to himself but nodded anyways. “I hate it.”

“I know. You’re not the only one.” Meng Yao guided Wen Ning to sit near the bedroll and then pressed a cup of tea into his hands. “Here. You look like you need this.”

Wen Ning wasn’t sure what, exactly, broke the dam he’d done his best to push everything behind until he could deal with it at a later time. His breath hitched as tears started to run down his face, his worry and anger mixing into one giant morass of feelings that threatened to swamp him. He felt the tea cup be taken away and then strong but gentle arms encircle him from behind, the warm scents of leather and pine letting him know who it was that was comforting him.

“Ah, Ning-*di*, I forget how young you are sometimes,” Nie Mingjue murmured, moving so that Wen Ning was firmly ensconced in his upright embrace. “I know you’re not a child, not by any stretch of the imagination, but you make it hard to remember that you’re barely sixteen and not my age or older.”

Wen Ning turned in Nie Mingjue’s hold, curling up against him as the tears flowed. He’d lived far too many years over two lifetimes and never had he felt like the world was crumbling around him, not like this. Loving someone so deeply was a joy and curse, he thought, and the fear that came with the potential loss of that love was paralyzing.

Meng Yao sat quietly nearby, waiting until Wen Ning’s harsh sobs had turned to the occasional rough gasp or hiccup before offering him a refreshed cup of tea. Wen Ning carefully took it and then sipped at the hot liquid, not bothering to move from his comfortable spot. Besides, it seemed Nie Mingjue was garnering some amount of comfort from it as well.

Another hour passed before they got any news regarding Nie Huaisang, and by that time, Wen Ning had moved so he was sitting next to Nie Mingjue, leaning slightly against him for support. Meng Yao sat across from them, cradling his own cup of tea in his hands. When the tent flap was pushed open and Wei Wuxian came in, all three of them paused in their conversation.

“Any news?” Nie Mingjue asked hopefully. Wei Wuxian nodded, a tired but triumphant smile spreading across his face.

“I just checked at the medical tent,” he said. “It took a good amount of time for them to get the arrow and heal him, and Huaisang-*ge* will need to rest for a while before he can have visitors, but he’ll make it.”

Wen Ning sagged against Nie Mingjue, relief coursing through him. He offered up a quiet prayer to the gods for Nie Huaisang's continued survival, and then slowly began to rest and relax as much as was possible. He wouldn't be able to truly start feeling right again until he saw Nie Huaisang for himself, but as long as he had the support of those around him, he was willing to wait.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Meng-zhushou (assistant/aide)

Tiang-caifeng (tailor)

Constants and Variables

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: off-screen minor character death via poisoning (Jin Guangshan), brief and non-graphic discussions of theorized suicide.

Also: I adore the headcanon that the Nie disciples love their Sect Leader and his brother a ridiculous amount, and have incorporated it thusly into this fic.

Also also: -rubs grubby ace hands all over your favorite characters- These are mine now

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Pain radiated dully throughout Nie Huaisang's body as he slowly regained consciousness. He was on a soft bed, and the lingering bitter scent of medicine told him he was likely in the medical tent. The hazy memory of Wen Ning's voice calling out in panic after what Nie Huaisang assumed was an arrow hit him hard on the right side a few inches below his shoulder blade swam into the forefront of his mind. Breathing had immediately become a much bigger deal than usual as he collapsed in shock from the pain.

Everything after that was a blur followed by blessed unconsciousness. Nie Huaisang had no idea how long he'd been out, but he was still alive and on the road to recovery, so he wasn't going to complain about feeling pain, muted or otherwise. The feeling of unfamiliar spiritual energy running through his system in an attempt to bolster his own and ease his pain had Nie Huaisang turning his head to see who was at his side. Muzzy surprise radiated through him when he saw that it was Jin Zixuan sitting there, eyes closed as he focused on feeding energy to him.

“Hm... *Xiongzhong*? Where is everyone else?”

Jin Zixuan opened his eyes as he roused from his meditative state, straightening up when he saw that Nie Huaisang was awake and mostly aware. “A-Sang! How're you feeling?”

“Alive, which, you know, is always good,” Nie Huaisang said, giving him a shaky smile. Jin Zixuan sat back with a huff, letting go of Nie Huaisang's hand as he did so.

“I don't know how you can still call me brother,” he said bitterly, “what with all the pain my family has caused you.”

Nie Huaisang glared at him. “If I had one of my fans,” he said, “I'd be hitting you upside the head with it.”

“But-!”

Nie Huaisang's glare intensified at that. “No, stop it,” he said as Nie Zonghui entered the tent. “I'm not- Nie Zonghui!”

“Nie-*gongzi*,” Nie Zonghui replied, noting Nie Huaisang's agitated state and tensing in readiness accordingly. “Is everything alright?”

“No, everything isn't alright! One of my brothers is being stupid!”

Nie Zonghui relaxed, a smile flickering across his face as he moved to Nie Huaisang's bedside. “Isn't that the norm for your brothers, though?”

“Well, yes, but not normally to this level,” Nie Huaisang said. “He seems to think I wouldn't want to be his brother any more because of what his *cousin* did.”

“Ah, I see. Jin-*gongzi*, I'm afraid you're stuck with him for life unless you deliberately do something to cause harm to him or those he loves,” Nie Zonghui said, not bothering to hide his amusement. “My cousin is a true Nie in that regard. He loves and protects fiercely. He may act like a songbird, but he has the heart of a falcon.”

“Nie Zonghui!” Nie Huaisang protested, face flushing. “*Honestly*.”

“Honestly,” Nie Zonghui said unashamedly.

“Worst. Cousin. *Ever*.”

“So you say. But I suppose if I'm the worst cousin, then maybe I should leaving the fetching of your other brothers to Jin-*gongzi*?”

Nie Huaisang sighed. “Fine, fine, you're not the *worst*,” he grumbled. “And don't forget Jiang Cheng and Wen Ning, okay?”

“I won't.”

Nie Zonghui gently tugged the end of one of Nie Huaisang's smaller braids and then left the tent with purpose in his stride. Nie Huaisang watched him go with a fond smile.

“I don't think I'll ever understand your sect,” Jin Zixuan said.

“Huh? Why?” Nie Huaisang moved position, a quiet grunt leaving him as a flare of pain rolled through him.

“You're all so close. Like a true family rather than just a group of cultivators under one leader.”

“Hm. Well, a lot of us *are* actually related by blood,” Nie Huaisang said, “but I've never really known us to act in any other way.”

“The only person in my sect I'm even remotely close to like that is Mianmian.” Jin Zixuan sighed. “Koi Tower isn't exactly a safe place to be that open or close to people.”

“Well, maybe once you're Sect leader, you can change that,” Nie Huaisang suggested. “And if you ever get tired of dealing with your sect, bring Mianmian and Jiang-*guniang* to Qinghe with you. They're always welcome, as are you.”

“Hm. So I've been told by your cousin,” Jin Zixuan said. “Jin Zixun has been banned from both the Unclean Realm and Eclipse Manor unless he's in dire need. As far as I know, Lotus Pier remains

open to him for the time being, but I think Jiang-zongzhu is being cautious because the wedding is so close. I don't know about the Cloud Recesses.”

Nie Huaisang nodded, wishing he could sit up but not wanting to cause any further harm to himself just in case. “That leaves him a lot of places to go. Do you think your father will keep him in the sect?”

“I don't know,” Jin Zixuan admitted as the tent flap opened again, admitting Nie Huaisang's other brothers as well as Meng Yao, and Lan Xichen. Wen Ning and Wen Qing followed shortly after, with the latter shooing Nie Huaisang's visitors to one side while she checked on him. Nie Huaisang was glad to be carefully propped up on several bolster pillows, his body sore but still able to support him. He was suddenly very glad that he'd actually worked on learning and developing his cultivation far beyond what he had in his first lifetime, because he highly doubted he'd have been able to move, let alone sit up, so soon after coming through such a strenuous event.

“You look better than expected,” Jiang Cheng said, making Nie Huaisang laugh for a short while before he had to stop from the ache.

“Ever the diplomat, Cheng-di,” he said. “You're going to be a terror when you're sect leader.”

“They'll have plenty of time to get used to me,” Jiang Cheng said with a dismissive sniff. Nie Huaisang nodded, pleased that his sworn brother would hopefully have plenty of time before he had to take on the responsibilities of being Jiang-zongzhu. Maybe they'd even be able to get him to find a partner that he'd be willing to marry this time around since he wouldn't have to focus on Jin Ling's well-being and happiness before his own.

“I'm just glad you're alive,” Wei Wuxian said. “Just wait until everyone back home hears and sees that you're okay. They're not going to let you out of their sight for a *week*.”

“A week?” Nie Mingjue asked, amused. “Try a month at least.”

Nie Huaisang groaned softly. He loved his sect members, he truly did, but for all the eager warrior stereotype that the rest of the cultivation world believed the Nie embodied, the lot of them were all mother hens down to the smallest disciple. Nie Huaisang firmly blamed his brother for that and mentally prepared himself for far too much fussing in his future.

“I *definitely* don't think I'll ever understand your sect, A-Sang,” Jin Zixuan said with a sigh.

“Eh, you'll have plenty of time to get used to it.” Nie Huaisang patted him on the arm. “Alright, someone talk to me about what's going on out there.” He waved a hand in the general direction of the tent entrance. “*Xiongzhang* has already told me the basics, but something tells me there's more to it.”

Nie Mingjue huffed out a laugh. “Observant brat,” he said fondly. “Jin Guangshan is insisting that the Crowd Hunt continue on, albeit without Jin Zixun's attendance. No use wasting all the effort to put it on because of what he's calling an 'unfortunate accident'.”

“I'm guessing a lot of the minor sects are agreeing with him?”

“Those under Jin oversight, for sure,” Meng Yao said dryly. “He just wants to save face and money, I'm sure. Still, if we make a good showing at the Hunt and then you come to the celebratory banquet afterward, Jin Zixun will either have to apologize to you or not attend at all.”

“Let's hope for the second option,” Wen Ning muttered, taking a seat on the edge of Nie Huaisang's bed. He picked up one of Nie Huaisang's hands and ran his thumbs over its back. “But sending that kind of message to the Jin is very tempting. No offense meant, Jin-gongzi.”

Jin Zixuan shook his head. “None taken. Trust me, I've not been all that pleased with my father or cousin for *years*.”

“We won't say a word,” Lan Xichen promised, a hint of a smile lingering around his eyes. “Wen-yisheng, will he be able to attend the Hunt?”

“He'd be better off in the observation stands,” Wen Qing said. “He's still healing, cultivator or not. That arrow nicked his lung. We were lucky it didn't go further than it did, and that A-Ning was right there to keep him stable while we got him here.”

“It was that serious?” Jin Zixuan asked, the color draining from his face.

“Yes. Had he been a non-cultivator, it's unlikely he would've survived for long enough for us to help him,” Wen Qing said. “As it is, he's lucky that he'll be fully healed within the week. But no strenuous activity until then. Your doctors will be able to take care of you and tell you what you need to do. I would stay in Qinghe with you until I'm satisfied you're well, but unfortunately there are matters in Qishan that need to be attended to first.”

“It's fine,” Nie Huaisang assured her. “Like you said, the Nie doctors will be able to take care of me. I can do paperwork or something for that week. I'll help Yao-ge with something.”

“We'll see about that.” Meng Yao shot him a knowing look. “Assuming you don't just spend the time painting and playing with your birds.”

“I would *never*.”

The laughter that earned from all of his brothers had Nie Huaisang pretending to huff and pout, but he couldn't keep the content smile from curling his lips. To see Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng laughing with one another at his antics made Nie Huaisang happy, especially given the severe lack of laughter the two had experienced in the prior timeline. He caught Nie Mingjue's knowing look as he settled back onto his pillows but didn't care about it at all. A little pain on his part was nothing in comparison to the happiness of others.

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When Nie Huaisang emerged from the healer's tent with his eldest brother by his side and clad in a new outfit with one of his fans in hand, it was to find a more sizable crowd than expected waiting for him. The Nie disciples were there, but so were some of the younger disciples of the other four Great Clans. It was startling to see Jin disciples there, even if they were lingering on the edges of the group like wary feral cats.

“*Da-shixiong!*”

“*Nie-xiong!*”

“Are you alright?”

“Will you be in the Hunt?”

Nie Huaisang held up his hands to stave off the avalanche of questions, startled laughter bubbling out of him.

“What are all of you doing here?” he asked. “I’m hardly on my deathbed. Wen-*yisheng* and the other doctors are very skilled in their work.”

“We wanted to see you!” Hu Yiran, one of the younger Nie disciples, piped up, her eyes bright. “It was just going to be us, but then everyone else wanted to come and see how you were doing as well. We made the Jin promise not to hurt you again.”

“That wasn’t their fault, *shimei*,” Nie Huaisang said gently. “It was Jin Zixun’s fault. Besides, Jin-*gongzi* is my sworn brother, so as long as his *shidi* and *shimei* promise not to cause trouble, they’re welcome here.”

“We won’t!” one of the Jin disciples insisted, his chest puffing up at the accusation. “Not all of us are like *Jin Zixun*.”

“Keep proving it and we’ll be good,” Hu Yiran told him firmly, hands on her hips. It was amusing to see a fourteen-year-old girl tell off someone at least three years older than her and a good half-foot taller, even more so when the Jin disciple nodded eagerly at her admonishment. Nie Huaisang hid his grin behind his open fan, his heart soaring with sudden joy. Such a small stone being tossed into the pond of life- being sworn brothers with Jin Zixuan -had wrought so many more beneficial ripples than expected. Maybe all the sects would be able to get through the coming years with a far better relationship than before.

“Alright, alright, you’ve all seen him,” Nie Mingjue said, the smile lurking at the edges of his mouth and eyes softening the gruffness of his words. “You have a hunt to do and can come see him later. And no, he won’t be joining you. Wen-*yisheng*’s orders. He’s to rest for now.”

“I’ll be cheering all of you on,” Nie Huaisang assured the juniors, “and I mean *all* of you, no matter what sect. Just have fun and be careful, alright? I’ll see you at the banquet after and then you can regale me with all your stories.”

Hu Yiran darted forward, hugging him quickly and carefully before running off, her fellow disciples following after her once they’d said their own goodbyes. Nie Huaisang followed Nie Mingjue and the others to the audience stands, Jin Zixuan and Wei Wuxian going to join the other Jin and Nie disciples at one of the entrances to the hunting grounds. Nie Huaisang settled in between his eldest brother and Wen Ning, pointedly ignoring Jin Guangshan’s questions about how he was doing.

He let Wen Ning draw him into a conversation that soon had Meng Yao and Lan Xichen actively participating in it, Nie Mingjue occasionally adding his own comments. When one of the Jin attendants signaled that it was safe to walk through certain portions of the hunting grounds that had been cleared of prey, Nie Huaisang stayed by Wen Ning’s side as they strolled along, leaves crunching under their boots. It was a far better experience than before for the both of them than before, something they appreciated greatly.

Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli were walking together not too far away, heads bent companionably together as they talked. The tension that had existed between them in the prior timeline was nowhere in sight, and Nie Huaisang knew for a fact that Jin Zixuan had already almost finished the construction and planting of a far bigger lotus pond with fish in it for his bride-to-be in one of the private courtyards near their marital home. The suggestion that it be warded against not only

animals looking for a quick snack but also against children potentially falling in had made Jin Zixuan stop dead in his tracks when Nie Huaisang had brought it up, only for him to start worrying about being a good father a few seconds later when his brain caught back up.

“I don't want to be like my father!” Jin Zixuan had lamented. “I don't know how to raise a child! What if I mess it up?”

“Well, it's a good thing you have more than just your father to rely on for good parenting advice,” Nie Huaisang told him. “And *xiongzhang*, you're so unlike your father that I'd hardly believe you're related if I didn't know your name. Well, okay, you have his eyes, but *still*. You've got a lot of resources and plenty of people to help you, so long as you're willing to take that help. But that's all in the future. You've still got to get married, after all.”

Nie Huaisang turned his attention away from his sworn brother and to Wen Ning, smiling at him. He'd yet to figure out what the betrothal token he wanted to give to him would look like. Something that would represent the both of them. Perhaps a *sanzuwu*, or three-legged-crow, given its traditional association with both mulberry trees and the sun. A somewhat subtle reference, perhaps, but one that amused him nonetheless. Maybe that with... Hm. A tassel dyed with silver and copper, perhaps? No, even better- a silver tassel for Wen Ning's and a copper one for his own. Yes, that would work nicely.

Happy with his idea- though he'd continue to mull it over for the time being -Nie Huaisang tucked his hand into the crook of Wen Ning's bent arm, keeping him close as they walked. The Hunt was declared officially over a few hours later, the ward-masters carefully shrinking the range of the containment wards until all of the remaining beasts had been corralled in one area for either relocation or extermination. By that time, Nie Huaisang was ready to sit and enjoy the feast, as well as the tales the juniors had to tell him.

The feast back at Koi Tower found Nie Huaisang happily ensconced among a crowd of juniors of various sects as he listened to their stories about the Hunt. Wen Ning sat nearby, looking highly amused at the gathering around his betrothed. Nie Huaisang let him be, too involved in the story one of the Ouyang juniors was telling- she may have been an aunt or cousin of Ouyang Zizhen, but only time would tell -to worry about Wen Ning's reactions all that much.

Nie Huaisang surreptitiously glanced around the hall, noting the various cliques and groups that had formed once the formal dining part of the feast had ended. People-watching had always been one of the more useful weapons in his social arsenal throughout the years. It fascinated him how people acted with others, especially when they thought they were being unobserved.

Sect Leader Yao was talking with Jin Guangshan, something that had Nie Huaisang narrowing his eyes. So far, Sect Leader Yao hadn't caused *too* much trouble over the years, but the man had been one of the banes of the cultivation world's existence, causing trouble, whether intentionally or not, with his fair-weather politics and traditionalist views. Having him so visibly aligned with Jin Guangshan was worrying but not so much that Nie Huaisang thought it was any more of a problem than it had been in the prior timeline.

“*Da-shixiong*, is everything alright?”

Nie Huaisang blinked and then focused on Hu Yiran, giving her a quick smile. “Oh, I'm fine, *Hu-mei*. Just lost in thought. Please go on, *Ouyang-jie*.”

The remainder of the feast passed without issue, and soon Nie Huaisang found himself on Baxia's broad blade for the ride back to Qinghe, Nie Mingjue keeping him steady with a hand on his shoulder. Wen Qing hadn't cleared him for flying Yaotou, so it was better to be safe than sorry. It was good to be home and able to sleep in his own bed, especially with his continued recovery. When they landed in front of the Unclean Realm, Nie Huaisang breathed in as deeply as he could, his heart happy at the familiar scents of pine, stone, and *home*.

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Time passed, as it was accustomed to doing, eventually coming to one crisp winter afternoon and yet another celebration at Koi Tower. Nie Huaisang approached Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli at the head table where they were sitting with a broad congratulatory smile.

“*Xiongzhang, Sao-zi*,” he said, bowing to them. “Congratulations to the two of you. May you have a harmonious union that lasts a hundred years.”

“Thank you, A-Sang,” Jin Zixuan replied, returning the smile with one of his own. “It's been a long time coming.”

“It has,” Jiang Yanli said, “but it's been well worth it. May I call you A-Sang as well?”

“Of course!” Nie Huaisang laughed. “*Da-ge* likes to tease me that I collect brothers like I do fans; having a sister should help balance out things some.”

Jiang Yanli hid a laugh behind her hand, the corners of her eyes crinkling in her mirth. “I'll do my best,” she promised. She paused, glancing at her husband before speaking once more. “Speaking of brothers... would you speak with A-Cheng? He's been rather quiet recently, but he won't talk to me about whatever is troubling him.”

“I would be happy to,” Nie Huaisang said. “Don't worry, I'll get to the bottom of this.”

“Thank you, A-Sang. It means a lot to me.”

Nie Huaisang went in search of Jiang Cheng, eventually finding his sworn brother in a quiet courtyard, his winter cloak pulled tightly around his shoulders as he sat on a bench and stared off into space, clearly lost in thought. Nie Huaisang sighed quietly and then took a seat next to him, gently nudging him with a shoulder.

“Everything alright? I would've thought you'd still be in the banquet hall.”

Jiang Cheng shrugged dully. “I wanted some air. And...” He scuffed his boot against the ground, scattering the snow there. “Now that A-Jie is married, my parents have been talking about it being my turn.”

Nie Huaisang hummed thoughtfully. “Do you think you'd want to be married?”

“I don't know. I-” Jiang Cheng hunched his shoulders. “Marriage is a big step.”

Nie Huaisang nodded, idly tapping his fan against his palm. “So,” he said after a while, “what part of marriage is concerning you the most? I'm assuming they want you to marry a woman to provide blood heirs?”

“Yeah.”

“And are you alright with that?”

“Women are nice?” Jiang Cheng said, scratching at his chin. “I’ve never been *not* attracted to them.”

“Well, that’s a good start. And what about heirs? You’ve never really talked about if you’re interested in sex or not.”

Jiang Cheng stiffened. Ah. Nie Huaisang reached out and patted his arm. “You know it’s not a bad thing if you’re not, right? Or if you’re only interested in sex with a certain person or if you’re not sure at all.”

“You need sex for blood heirs, though.”

“True,” Nie Huaisang said calmly, “but that doesn’t mean you have to like it. Think about it like this: Most people like... oh, let’s say tea. It’s everywhere, easily available, and a generally expected part of life. With me so far?”

“I guess.”

“Good. Now! Not everyone likes tea. Some prefer water. Or some prefer only certain kinds of tea. Or maybe just one specific blend and they’ll only drink that kind of tea and no other. Some people aren’t sure if they like tea, but they’re willing to try it. Some people are disgusted by tea and won’t touch it with a ten foot pole. Now then, all you have to figure out are your own preferences. Take *da-ge*, for example. Continuing with the metaphor, he doesn’t really like tea except for two particular blends.”

“And you?”

“Have never really considered any other blend save for the one Wen Ning can provide me,” Nie Huaisang said with a smirk. Jiang Cheng groaned.

“You are *horrible*,” he muttered.

“No, just a man of exacting tastes.”

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes. “I think,” he said after some time and some thoughtful silence, “that I would want to know the person I’m... taking tea with before I decide to-” He waved a hand absently. “-drink. I can see the beauty in people at any time, but I don’t feel the need to go beyond that usually.”

“Hm. Then maybe you can tell your parents that you’d prefer a long courtship like your sister had so that way you can be sure of the long-term viability of the marriage. After all, whoever you marry will be the next Jiang-*furen*, and she’ll need to have the staying power for that. And having a happy marriage will only add to the success of that. I’m sure even your mother would be accepting of that reasoning.”

Jiang Cheng straightened up at that, looking far more happy about the situation than he had before. “Yeah. Yeah, that could work,” he said. He ran a hand over his mouth before nudging Nie Huaisang. “Thanks.”

“Any time.”

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The world remained relatively peaceful over the next few months. The news that Jiang Yanli was expecting her first child in the autumn had Nie Huaisang breathing out a sigh of relief. He'd been worried that the timeline had changed too much for Jin Ling and those of his generation to be born at the correct times, but that worry seemed to be all for naught. Lan Jingyi was born at the end of that summer as expected, his father a second cousin of Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji.

A-Yuan was thriving with Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji as his parents. For the time being, A-Yuan was living in Qinghe, though that would soon change. Lan Wangji made frequent trips between Gusu and Qinghe, staying for days at a time before duty called him back home.

The preparations for the wedding between Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji came to a head a half-month after Wei Wuxian's birthday, culminating in the long-awaited ceremony that saw the Nie and Lan sects officially joined for the first, but certainly not last, time in well over a century. Nie Huaisang caught his brother staring at Lan Wangji in awe more than once during the celebratory banquet, looking as if he couldn't believe the day had finally come that he could officially call Lan Wangji husband and A-Yuan his son.

Nie Huaisang found it strange not to have Wei Wuxian living full-time in Qinghe, as he and Lan Wangji had decided to make the Cloud Recesses their permanent home. It wasn't like Wei Wuxian was gone forever, though, as he promised to visit as often as he could with his family in tow or just on his own. Nie Huaisang had known it was coming, but he still had to get used to the idea nonetheless.

He saw Wei Wuxian not long after at Jin Ling's one-month celebration. Jin Ling was a fat and happy baby, much like Nie Huaisang remembered, and both Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli seemed happy as well, albeit rather tired as they were still adjusting to having a baby in their lives. Jin Zixun was noticeably absent from the celebration, though to be honest it was unsurprising. Jin Zixun had been 'gifted' the position of overseer at one of the more remote Jin outposts within their territory, sending him well away from Koi Tower and any possibilities of running into anyone from the Wen or Nie sects.

It wasn't the harsh ending that many wanted for the man, but Nie Huaisang didn't mind. He hadn't forgiven or forgotten Jin Zixun, however, and had set a spy to keep an eye on him just in case. Out of sight, out of mind was a favorite tactic of Jin Guangshan's, be that in regards to his children or the more troublesome members of his sect.

Nie Huaisang's spies had discreetly located Fan Qiang and Fan Liu some time ago. The twins' parents were a local magistrate and his wife, the latter of whom Jin Guangshan had seduced a half-month or so before her wedding. The twins had been born later than expected, muddling the timeline of their birth enough that their adoptive father hadn't questioned their paternity. They were six years old now and by all accounts their parents adored them. Nie Huaisang kept Jin Zixuan quietly updated at his brother's request, though to be honest, the twins seemed perfectly content in their own lives, so the updates came infrequently.

Meng Yao visited Koi Tower often, sometimes under the guise of actual work and other times just to visit with Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli. Occasionally he'd take Mo Xuanyu with him, much to Jin Guangshan's annoyance. The sect leader didn't dare complain about that- at least, not within Madam Jin's hearing -but he wasn't above passive-aggressively snubbing Meng Yao when he visited, ignoring him entirely.

Or so Nie Huaisang thought.

That assumption was challenged when Meng Yao returned from a visit to Lanling shortly after the Lunar New Year. Right away, Nie Huaisang could tell he was troubled more so than he usually was after visiting Koi Tower. It was surprisingly easy to get him to agree to a private dinner with a small amount of cajoling. Nie Huaisang made sure to have the kitchens send over several of Meng Yao's favorites, as well as two jars of wine in case Meng Yao wanted or needed something stronger than tea.

Meng Yao joined him in his rooms once he'd reported to Nie Mingjue that he'd returned among other things, arriving shortly before the food did. Nie Huaisang purposefully kept the conversation light as they ate. He didn't expect asking after Jin Ling's health to make Meng Yao drain his tea and then reach for the wine.

"Yao-ge? What's wrong?"

Meng Yao poured a healthy measure of wine into the teacup and then downed it like it was water and not one of the stronger variants of wine currently available. He poured and drank a second full cup shortly after, alarming Nie Huaisang even further.

"Right," he said, grabbing the wine jars away and placing them out of Meng Yao's reach, "what the hell is going on?"

"My *father*," Meng Yao spat, "is an asshole."

"Yes," Nie Huaisang said warily, "everyone knows that. You don't usually look to get drunk when talking about him, though. That's not your style."

"It can be tonight," Meng Yao grumbled. "If I promise to drink more slowly, can I have the wine back?"

"First tell me what's going on and then we'll see about the wine," Nie Huaisang countered. Meng Yao half-looked like he was going to lunge over the table but settled back, putting his cup down on the table with a decisive clink of porcelain against lacquered wood.

"Sect Leader Jin has decided that now that things have calmed down sufficiently enough that he should be Chief Cultivator," Meng Yao said, his voice holding a deadly venom as he spoke about his father, "but that certain people stand in his way of doing so."

Ah, so it was that time already, then? Interesting. Nie Huaisang had expected Jin Guangshan to send assassins since Meng Yao had proven time and time again that he wasn't interested in playing his games.

"Let me guess," Nie Huaisang said as he poured another cup of wine for Meng Yao and then a first for himself, "he wants you to kill *da-ge*. And since you don't hold any loyalty to him..." He set the wine jar down. "Who did he threaten if you didn't agree? That's the only way I can see him expecting you to do anything for him."

"A-Ling."

Nie Huaisang froze with his cup halfway to his mouth. He carefully put it down and then leaned in.

“What did he say *exactly*?”

Meng Yao drank half his cup before he answered, his mouth twisting in a disgusted snarl. “He said, ‘After all, children that young die all the time. If Jiang Yanli does her duty to my son, then they’ll surely have other children after his unfortunate demise.’”

“I see. A pity he won’t live to see the spring,” Nie Huaisang said casually, watching Meng Yao closely to see his reaction. Meng Yao stared at him, surprise writ broad across his face.

“What?”

“You- You’re going to kill him? *You*?”

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes. “Yao-ge, I’ve been running the intelligence network for the sect since I was *thirteen*. We have one of the most robust networks in the whole of the cultivation world. It’s not solely because I enjoy finding out information, you know. I’ve made it that way so that I can protect the sect and the people I care about. Jin Guangshan’s ambitions aren’t exactly a secret to me, even without the aid of my spies. As for the exact method of his death, when it’ll be delivered, and who will be delivering it, the less you know, the better. Just rest assured that A-Ling will be safe. He’s my nephew too, you know, and I plan on being his uncle for a *very* long time.”

Meng Yao drank the rest of his wine, still looking rather dazed. Nie Huaisang contented himself with sipping at his own drink, already thinking of various ways to end the problem of Jin Guangshan once and for all.

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A chill breeze drifted through the Fragrant Palace, ruffling the many sumptuous gauze curtains. Currently, the occupant of the Palace was elsewhere, leaving the building unattended for a brief time. A dark figure slipped through one of the few open windows, moving soundlessly across the floor. It paused every so often to check a talisman it held, only moving on when the talisman stayed inert. When it reached Jin Guangshan’s bedchamber- one he certainly did *not* share with his wife -it set to work, placing a golden plate with several sweet steamed rice cakes that Jin Guangshan was known to favor on a serving tray on a table, a cover keeping the plate from attracting any insects. As a finishing touch, a note that simply read ‘To Jin-*zongzhu*, thank you’ was propped up against the cover. With that finished, the figure melted away into the deep shadows and settled in to wait.

Jin Guangshan entered his bedchamber alone, waving off the help of his assistant and dismissing him for the night. Only when the assistant had gone and Jin Guangshan was alone did the sect leader notice the note and dish.

“Hm? What’s this?”

He picked up the note, the faint scent of a woman’s perfume wafting up from the fine paper as he read. His curiosity getting the better of him, Jin Guangshan lifted the lid off the plate, delight flashing across his face when he saw what was waiting for him. Much to the dark figure’s disgust, he ate all three in quick succession, though the faint muttered comment of “Hm, a little *too* sweet, perhaps,” did escape Jin Guangshan’s lips after he’d finished eating.

The figure waited until Jin Guangshan was fast asleep in his bed before collecting the tray, note, and plate, a faint shimmer of spiritual energy seeing the two dishes absolutely spotless and

sanitized. The curtains fluttered as the figure passed through the open window and then settled again, leaving no trace behind.

-/-

Nie Mingjue enjoyed spending time with his two betrothed. It was starting to get more and more rare for all three of them to have time to share and to be in the same space to share it in, but that would be the way of the world for them for as long as either Nie Mingjue or Lan Xichen were sect leaders. Meng Yao would be the more mobile of the three, traveling freely between Gusu and Qinghe as often as he liked.

As such, any time Nie Mingjue got with both of them in the same place was something he cherished greatly, so to have Nie Zonghui apologetically interrupt the meal he, Lan Xichen, and Meng Yao were sharing was frustrating. However, he knew Nie Zonghui wouldn't have bothered them if it wasn't important.

"Nie Zonghui. What's the matter?" Nie Mingjue asked, noting the way his cousin was holding himself.

"A missive from Lanling, sir."

Nie Mingjue's eyebrows rose as he accepted the scroll from Nie Zonghui. A quick check showed that it was still sealed, which didn't explain the seriousness Nie Zonghui was displaying.

"How was this delivered?"

"By courier. But... he had a white sash around his waist, and when I asked about it... Well. I expect the letter will explain more, but it sounds like Jin-zongzhu has died."

Nie Mingjue opened the scroll and read over the letter. It was indeed a notice that Jin Guangshan had died a few days prior, though how, it didn't say. The letter went on to say that Jin Zixuan had taken up his father's mantle shortly after his death and that any pending negotiations or agreements would have to be put on hold for the next hundred days while the mourning period was observed.

Nie Mingjue set the letter down, barely noticing when Lan Xichen picked it up and read it over or when Nie Zonghui left the room. He instead focused on Meng Yao, concerned for his beloved. Meng Yao was pale and his hands faintly shaking. Nie Mingjue reached out and took Meng Yao's hands in his, doing his best to soothe him.

"A-Yao?"

Meng Yao shook his head, taking in a shuddering breath before answering. "I'm fine. I just-" He laughed hollowly. "I try not to really think about him most days, but... Gods, it really *was* before spring."

Nie Mingjue frowned. "What?"

Meng Yao hesitated. "It's nothing. Just... something someone said to me."

Just then, Nie Huaisang came into the room, his voice preceding his actual appearance. "*Da-ge*, do you know why-" He broke off when he saw the tableau before him, his eyebrows rising sharply. "Is everything alright?"

“We just received news that Jin Guangshan has died,” Lan Xichen said.

“Ah. That explains the courier, then,” Nie Huaisang replied, flicking his fan open and starting to wave it near his face. Nie Mingjue knew that look. That was the look of his brother trying to hide how pleased he was about something. He doubted Lan Xichen or Meng Yao were aware enough just then to notice it, but Nie Mingjue saw it as clear as the summer sky.

“It does. Xichen, can you take care of A-Yao for a moment? I need to talk to Huaisang about not barging in. *Again.*”

Nie Mingjue transferred Meng Yao over to Lan Xichen's care before getting up and all but hauling his brother out of the small dining room and into a nearby storage room. Nie Huaisang yelped and protested the sudden movement, though Nie Mingjue was quick to note he dropped the act the moment the door had slid shut behind them.

“Did you have anything to do with this?”

“With the closet?”

“Do *not* play dumb with me,” Nie Mingjue growled, poking his brother in the chest, “not with this.”

Nie Huaisang pushed his hand away, the mask of the carefree young master he showed most of the world falling away to reveal that of the sharp mind hidden behind it. “You're welcome, by the way.”

“Welcome?! What do you mean by that?”

“What I *mean* is that he tried to get Yao-ge to kill you. *Again,*” Nie Huaisang said, snapping his fan shut. “But this time he used different leverage.”

“What?”

“Not what. *Who* . He threatened to kill A-Ling.”

Nie Mingjue was stunned into silence as he stared at Nie Huaisang in the dim light filtering in through the door.

“He threatened to kill his own grandson? How do you know?”

“Yao- ge told me, of course. I just made sure that such a thing wouldn't come to pass.”

“And were you the one to do it?”

Nie Huaisang snorted sharply. “What, and give away my secrets? I'm not *that* stupid, *da-ge*. The less people know, the better. A secret is only well kept by silence.”

He tilted his closed fan pointedly toward the door, where two shadows were just barely visible through the rice paper. Nie Mingjue pinched at the bridge of his nose. Well, fuck. They'd probably have to answer some tough questions depending on how much had been heard by the others.

Figuring it was better to get it over and done with, Nie Mingjue turned to the door and moved quickly enough to open it that Lan Xichen and Meng Yao had little time to do more than take a few steps back. He looked between the two of them, sighed, and then gestured for them to follow him to

his office. Nie Huaisang trailed along behind them, settling in next to him at the table there once the door was shut and the heavy privacy wards activated. Meng Yao and Lan Xichen sat across from them, both looking confused at what they'd heard.

"I take it you have some questions?"

"Just one," Meng Yao said. "What did Huaisang mean by my f- by Jin Guangshan trying to get me to kill you 'again'?"

"That," Nie Mingjue replied with a grim expression, "is a very long story, and not a very pretty one. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"It's something they should know before you get married, *da-ge*," Nie Huaisang said softly. "You know how bad your nightmares get sometimes. They need to understand the whys behind them."

Nie Mingjue could see the sense behind his brother's words, but he still shied away from just blurting it out. "You start the story, and I'll pick it up as needed," he decided. "After all, it was your idea in the first place."

Nie Huaisang gently nudged him with his shoulder before beginning to speak. "This will sound impossible at first, but I promise you that every word of it is true..."

The story wrapped up nearly three-quarters of an hour later as Nie Huaisang said, "And there you have it. Now, we can't exactly prove we actually traveled in time, not with all the changes we've made and how long it's been since we've traveled, but I swear we're not lying. You know *da-ge*. He's not one for fanciful stories like this, even if I possibly am."

"So, now you know," Nie Mingjue said, feeling both lighter and more worried now that the story was known. Neither Lan Xichen or Meng Yao had said much while he and Nie Huaisang had talked. By the end of it, Lan Xichen had closed his eyes in an attempt to steady himself, while Meng Yao was clutching at the fabric of his robes, his fingers curled tightly against his legs.

"I don't-" Meng Yao huffed sharply. "I don't *understand*. If I- if I did all of that to you, to both of you, why did you welcome me into your lives again? Why not just kill me when we first met and be done with it? Why meet me at all? You couldn't know that I wouldn't bring that kind of grief to you again."

"True," Nie Huaisang agreed, figuring beating around the bush would just cause more issues than anything else, "but we also cheated *massively*. Saving your mother was the first step. It was selfishness at first, to be honest. Having you in a place we could control and keep an eye on you. But... You *thrived* being here with your mother. And honestly, making sure you never seriously wanted to get your father's approval helped immensely. That was one of the driving forces, I think, behind Jin Guangyao's obsessive need to control everything. After all, if he was known more as the son of Jin Guangshan than his mother's son, he could control the narrative better. That didn't always work out for him, of course, but- and this is the most important thing here, Yao-ge -*you are not him*. The man he was is so far different from the man you are, though there are still similarities. Your fierce protectiveness over those you love and consider family. Your ruthlessness, though you've channeled that more toward the survival of Qinghe Nie than social climbing, and I think that's for the better. We're one of the more productive and better settled sects because of you, you know."

Nie Huaisang paused, letting Meng Yao soak in what he'd said. When Meng Yao didn't seem as shaky as before- though it would still be some time before he was back to his regular equilibrium -

Nie Huaisang continued on. “Besides, you know *da-ge*. If he thought there was any chance you'd try to betray him, you wouldn't be sitting in front of us today with that token on your waist. And Xichen-*ge*?”

Lan Xichen opened his eyes warily. “Yes?”

“You're not quite the man I once called *er-ge*, either. That man was far more worried about pleasing others and being a mediator. You still believe the best of everyone, true, but it's been tempered.”

Nie Huaisang grinned. “Sorry for corrupting you in that way, I guess.”

Lan Xichen shook his head.

“No, you-” He sighed. “It's a good thing, I think. Seeing the good in people is a worthwhile thing, but *only* seeking the good and being willfully blind to the bad is dangerous. And... You've helped people with what you've done, more than just A-Yao and me. You gave Nie Yang, Mo Xuanyu, and Wei Wuxian homes here when they would've otherwise been left to their own devices or raised in environments that were ultimately ill-fitting for them. You've allowed them to thrive and grow up to be good people. You've also saved Mo Meifen and Meng Shi and given them purpose in their lives beyond just being mothers to Jin Guangshan's children. They died in the other timeline, didn't they?”

Nie Mingjue nodded. “Yes. Meng Shi from complications of the illness she had when we first met her, and Mo Meifen...” He frowned. “I'm not sure. Huaisang?”

“The... *popular* rumor was heartbreak from being abandoned by Jin Guangshan after several years of his direct attention,” Nie Huaisang said. He smiled bitterly. “The truth is likely less romantic. None of the Mo family ever said, likely to avoid more scandal. They buried her quietly and went through the standard mourning period, but never really spoke of her much after that save to use her name as a weapon against Mo Xuanyu. My spies at the time thought it may have been suicide by hanging due to how Mo Xuanyu liked to make himself up to look like a hanged corpse with powder and rouge. I... I never got the chance to really confirm that theory.”

Meng Yao ran a hand over his face, scrubbing at it a few times before letting his hand drop. “This is a lot to take in,” he said. “I'm not- Whatever may have happened in that other timeline, I swear I won't be that man again.”

“You won't be,” Nie Mingjue said. “You never have been, not in the life we've lived together.”

“But I could be.”

“And I could be someone who flies into a rage and nearly *qi*-deviates over something stupid, but I'm not. I've worked hard at being better and so have the rest of you, even if you weren't aware of it,” Nie Mingjue retorted. “Like Huaisang said, you wouldn't be wearing that betrothal token if I didn't trust and care for you. You're not Jin Guangyao and you never will be. Too much has changed for that to happen. Besides, Jin Guangshan is dead, all of the pieces of Yin Iron have been destroyed, and Wei Wuxian never became the Yiling Patriarch. The Wens weren't all but extinguished and have a far better leader than Wen Ruohan. This timeline has had and will continue to have its own unique troubles, but the ones that created the mess of a life Huaisang and I came back from have been either avoided or dealt with in a far better fashion than they were before.”

Nie Huaisang chuckled. “That's the most I've heard you say in one sitting in a while, *da-ge*,” he teased. “Been saving that up for a while?”

“Huaisang?”

“Yes, *da-ge*?”

“Shut up.”

Chapter End Notes

This is what the rice cakes were laced/poisoned with. It's not a pleasant way to go: [Rosary Pea](#).
Jin Guangshan didn't get off easy, trust me.

Cleansing the Troubled Past

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's been almost a month since the last chapter, but I wanted to deal with the events of *Fatal Journey* and wrap up a few plot threads here and there in this chapter, and the former fought me *hard*. That being said, there should only be one more chapter left of this fic and then it'll be over. I'll probably head into *Scum Villain* territory next, but I've also got some other fics in my Immortal!Huaisang series in the pipeline, so I'm not entirely abandoning *The Untamed*/MDZS for it. Thanks for being patient, everyone, and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The notification that the wards around the ancestral hall at Xinglu Ridge had been disturbed woke Nie Mingjue out of a dead sleep in the early days of summer. He stared up at the dim ceiling above him for several long moments before sending out a nudge of spiritual energy to quell the alarm. He supposed he should've expected it to happen at some point, but he could've sworn they would have more time. He'd done his best to update and strengthen the wards and maze array around the hall throughout the years, but there was no combating the ingenuity of human beings even with the most stringent security measures.

Nie Mingjue ran a hand over his face and then sat up, the blankets pooling around his waist. He sighed as he stared out into his room. So much had gone badly the last time, leaving only himself and Nie Huaisang alive at the end of everything. He didn't want that to happen again, but he wasn't sure how they'd all be able to survive the final battle, assuming things went the same way.

He would have to speak with Nie Huaisang to see if anything had happened with the hall after the second time it had been broken into and what had been done to fix it. A glance toward a nearby window told Nie Mingjue that it was far too early to bother his brother, so it would be best to go back to sleep, if such a thing was possible. He lay back down, readjusting the blankets so they covered him once more.

The rest of the night was spent dozing on and off until it was a more reasonable hour and he was able to rise, get dressed, and head to breakfast in the dining hall with Meng Yao at his side. Nie Huaisang was already there at the head table, absently snacking on some early season peach slices as he read over a report from one of his spies, or so Nie Mingjue assumed. He looked up when he heard them draw near, the report vanishing into his *qiankun* sleeve with a flick of his fingers.

“*Da-ge*, *Yao-ge*!” he said, beaming at the two of them. His smile faded a little when he saw the expression on Nie Mingjue's face. “Is everything okay?”

“We'll talk about it after breakfast,” Nie Mingjue said as he took a seat at the table, Meng Yao not far behind him. Nie Huaisang nodded, his expression still wary even as he continued eating his fruit. Breakfast passed faster than Nie Mingjue would have preferred, but soon he, Nie Huaisang, and Meng Yao were ensconced in his office, a map of the Xinglu Ridge area spread out over the large table there.

“I got the notification that the wards had been disturbed late last night,” Nie Mingjue told them, running his fingers over the neatly inked lines of the map. “We'll have to make preparations to go there as soon as possible.”

Nie Huaisang nodded, the familiar look of concentration on his face telling Nie Mingjue his brother's thoughts were moving quickly.

“A dozen people at least,” he said, “all direct members of the family. We can't bring non-blood-related Nie. I don't want to test if any of the older wards deeper into the hall will have issues with that sort of thing. A-Yang will be annoyed when he hears that, I'm sure, but a fifteen year old likely shouldn't be brought along on such an intense mission regardless.”

“Mm. We should figure out a courtesy name for him eventually,” Nie Mingjue mused. “He's old enough for it and he has his sword now.”

“Qiuxing,” Meng Yao suggested. Nie Mingjue hummed as he thought it over. It would call back to the time of year when Nie Yang was initially found, but it also described both the young man's vibrancy and his zest for life all at once.

“Autumn star'. Well, I like it, but we'll have to run it by him first,” Nie Huaisang mused. “Now, besides people, what else should we bring?”

“What do you mean?”

Nie Huaisang waved his fan idly. “Well, it's an ancestral hall. Admittedly, not the primary one like what we have here, but still, it's important to remember that. I'll pack some appropriate offerings and incense just in case.”

Meng Yao hesitated. “Was that an issue, uh, before?”

“It likely would have helped matters,” Nie Mingjue replied. “We'll find out when we get there, I suppose.”

“I for one plan on returning with everyone we leave with,” Nie Huaisang said, a briefly shadowed expression passing over his face before he regained his composure. Nie Mingjue knew he regretted the deaths of all those who had come with them before, especially Nie Zonghui and Nie Tengfei, their cousin who had died in the Green Dragon chamber.

“As do I,” Nie Mingjue said. “Make your preparations. We'll leave at midday, and hopefully we can be back by tomorrow at the latest.”

Nie Huaisang nodded and then left to go get ready. Nie Mingjue trusted his brother would bring more than enough supplies for the offering, as well as what they would need for the journey through the hall itself. He'd bring his own supplies, of course, just as he should have done the first time around. He'd been foolish, thinking it would be a simple task to fix the wards and make sure the hall was secure.

It was all too soon before they were approaching Xinglu Ridge via sword. While horses would have made more sense, Nie Mingjue remembered that the fog from the misdirection maze array and the man-winding vine that had been drawn to the area had made quick work of their mounts shortly after arrival. It also allowed them to land far closer to the hall, though finding a good place to touch down was hard.

Nie Mingjue kept Baxia drawn, glad for the early afternoon sun that struggled weakly against the fog generated by the array. He glanced over, nodding to himself when he saw Nie Huaisang had his own sword in one hand and Dafeng in the other. It was still a little strange to see his brother so battle-ready even with all the evidence he'd personally witnessed over the years. Nie Mingjue still remembered how *soft* his brother had been in their first life- at least, from what he'd seen. Coming back and seeing the kind of man Nie Huaisang had grown into- had been *forced* to become -had been a shock to the system.

Gone was the young man who preferred poetry and painting over saber practice and physical battles. In his place was someone who used words and information as weapons and was as ruthless as any seasoned warrior. There was still some softness buried underneath all of that, and as they'd changed things more and more, the two personas had slowly melded into a more tempered version until Nie Huaisang had settled into the man he was today.

It made Nie Mingjue immeasurably proud of his brother, something he'd done his best to regularly let Nie Huaisang know. He looked around at the others, making sure they were ready to proceed.

"Keep your eyes open and your weapons at hand," he commanded as they started down the path leading to the ancestral sword hall, fog swirling around them as they went. "There may be things here that have been drawn to the hall or using the array for their own purposes."

"Is that why we didn't take horses, *zongzhu*?" one of the cultivators asked.

"That and we could move faster by sword," Nie Mingjue confirmed, scanning either side of the path as he went. Whether it was the sun or the time of day, they made it to the hall without encountering the man-winding vine. Either way, Nie Mingjue wasn't complaining about making it inside without losing anyone.

He tested the control array with twin bursts of spiritual energy, sighing when he found it to be just as defunct as it had been the first time around.

"Huaisang, you're best at astrology and astronomy," he said, turning to his brother. "Go to the Green Dragon chamber. Take half of our people with you. The rest of you are with me. And stay clear of the walls!"

Since they knew what to expect, it didn't take long for Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang to meet up again in the entrance hall, their fellow cultivators following along behind them. Nie Mingjue did a quick head count, pleased to see that the walls hadn't taken anyone this time around, and then led the way down the now-open corridor, the lights of the torches flickering around them. When they reached the bridge, Nie Huaisang attached two talismans to each post before activating them.

A shimmer of spiritual energy ran over the bridge, freezing the precarious structure in place and making it sturdy enough to cross. Nie Mingjue just hoped it would withstand their travel to and from the central burial chamber. He didn't relish all fourteen of them having to go through the cramped and twisting passageway he and Nie Huaisang had the first time around. They'd found that exit purely by chance; from what they'd been able to gather later, it had likely been a maintenance or builder's path that had long been abandoned.

When they reached the central burial chamber, Nie Mingjue held up a hand to stop the others before any of them stepped off the staircase.

"Wait. Something isn't right."

“*Da-ge*, can I try something?” Nie Huaisang asked.

“What are you thinking?”

Nie Huaisang straightened his shoulders and then bowed deeply to the seemingly empty room. “Greetings, honored ancestor! We of Nie blood have only recently learned of your presence here and have come to venerate you as is your due. We are deeply regretful about the neglect you've suffered here, and understand you have your grievances with us because of that.”

As he straightened up, a vibrant turquoise spirit in the shape of a sword rose out of the floor. Nie Mingjue tensed, watching the sword spirit warily. It moved quickly, darting toward the crowd and causing them to scatter. It targeted Nie Zonghui, possessing him with surprising ease much like the last time. Nie Mingjue had to wonder why it had such an easy time given all the soul calming and anti-possession rituals he knew Nie Zonghui had gone through as a child, just as the rest of them had, but ignored the question for the time being.

The spirit flexed Nie Zonghui's hands, wiggling his fingers one by one before turning to look at Nie Huaisang with pitch-dark eyes.

“You... you are not a typical Nie,” he said, his head tilted curiously. “Not a saber wielder, but... Hm. A viper hiding in silks. *Interesting*.”

Nie Huaisang lifted his chin, a small smirk curving his lips. “I try my best. I wasn't lying about being here to rectify the mistake of leaving you out of our veneration. To be honest, I'm not sure why you weren't included in the ancestral hall back home in the Unclean Realm. We have tablets going back at least to Nie Qiangshan there, after all.”

The spirit flicked his hand sharply. “I hold an echo of the man who once wielded me, nothing more,” he said, “linked here because of the bond we shared. We had thirty good years together, but he slowly stopped listening to me and-”

Nie Mingjue made a surprised noise. “Sorry for interrupting, but... listening to you? Were... were you able to actually talk with your wielder?”

“Not as much as I'd like,” the spirit said with a disgruntled expression. “When we were first bonded it was easier, but as time went on, it got harder and harder and he refused to listen no matter how much I tried to reach out to him.”

Nie Huaisang ran his hand over his mouth thoughtfully. “Hm. I wonder... *Da-ge*, what if it's the resentful energy? As the years go on, the resentful energy builds and... I don't know, blocks the communication paths? Like a snowstorm that starts out quietly and then becomes a blizzard over time? You can hear people in the first example, but barely at all in the second.”

“It's possible, I suppose,” Nie Mingjue said. “If that's true, then maybe it's not quite been the problem we've thought it has been. I'm not sure how we'd test that.”

“Well, there's always the mud pools in Nightless City. I know Wei Wuxian, Wen Qing, and Nie Yang were working on recreating it in one of the underground pools back home. Not sure how far they got, though,” Nie Huaisang said.

“Mud pools?! I'm not going to *dishonor our ancestors' sabers*,” Nie Mingjue retorted sharply.

Nie Huaisang waved a hand. "Well, treat them like equals, then," he said. "Go first with Baxia and then if it works, go in with each saber as needed. After all, they all belonged to clan leaders, so who better to help them get cleansed than the current one? Honored ancestor, if we were able to cleanse the resentful energy from your blade and then either reinter you here in the Blade Hall or in a new ancestral hall back in the Unclean Realm so generations to come can come and see you and your fellow sabers and provide offerings to you, would you agree with that? Or... Are you able to communicate with the other sabers buried here?"

"I'm the oldest blade here," the spirit said with a haughty sniff. "Of course I can."

Nie Huaisang bowed to it once more. "Would you be willing to speak to them to see if they would agree for us to help cleanse them and ease their burdens if the process proves to work, at the very least? If they are willing to be relocated to a more accessible place where we can properly venerate them as well as their former wielders, then that would be a wonderful bonus. While you do so, we will set up the offerings and present them to you as they should have been all this time."

The spirit eyed him for a long moment and then laughed brightly. "Ah, I like you, little viper! Go, do what you need. I'll speak to my brothers and sisters here. What is your name, by the way."

"My apologies. I am Nie Huaisang, and this is my brother and our current clan leader, Nie Mingjue."

"Both good names," the spirit said approvingly. "I am Yazhi. And don't worry, your companion that I am... *borrowing* will be fine. He is quite adamant that I not harm any of you. His loyalty to you is to be commended, as is that of those who've come with you. Not once have they tried to defy your orders and attack me."

"They know better," Nie Mingjue replied. Yazhi hummed in agreement.

"So I see. I'll be back when I'm done speaking with the others."

Yazhi carefully walked over to a corner and then sat down, his movements stiff and odd to see on Nie Zonghui's usually graceful frame. Then again, Nie Mingjue considered, he doubted Yazhi was used to walking, given his previous existence as a sword whose only method of self-propelled movement was flying. While Yazhi meditated quietly in the corner, the others set about doing as promised, putting their offerings on a quickly dusted-off altar and lighting some pine-scented incense. Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang led the ritual, standing at the front of the group while the others neatly arrayed themselves behind the two of them.

The ritual ended well before Yazhi had finished speaking with the other saber spirits, so the visiting Nies busied themselves with cleaning up the chamber the best they could before taking seats on the floor and talking quietly among themselves. Nie Mingjue broke off from his conversation with one of the disciples when Yazhi levered himself up from the floor and made his way over to their group.

"The other spirits have agreed pending proof that the process works," he said. "Return to us when you've either succeeded or failed. We'll be waiting here."

A dark turquoise aura surrounding Nie Zonghui was the only indication Yazhi gave of his departure. Nie Mingjue managed to catch his cousin as he collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, guiding him down to the floor with his cousin's head laying in his lap. Nie Zonghui stared dazedly up at him, blinking sluggishly as he regained his faculties.

“Zongzhu?”

“Zonghui. How are you doing?”

Nie Zonghui considered the question. “Tired,” he decided eventually. “Ancestor Yazi-*dao* was very interested in you and Nie-gongzi. He really likes both of you, from what I could tell.”

“We're probably the first direct descendants to come here with the sole purpose of actually honoring him and the others rather than just putting another saber to rest,” Nie Huaisang said with a lopsided smile.

“Hm. Zonghui, when you're ready, we'll head back home,” Nie Mingjue decided. “Hopefully we should be back by sunset.”

They did just that, closing up the hall and reestablishing the protective wards before taking to the skies on their blades. Nie Mingjue only fully breathed out in relief when all fourteen of them landed in front of the main gate to the Unclean Realm and were soon safely behind its thick walls. Meng Yao met him and Nie Huaisang in one of the courtyards near the healing hall where Nie Zonghui had been swiftly brought to, Nie Mingjue not wanting to risk leaving him with any side-effects of the albeit temporary possession.

“How did it go?” Meng Yao asked.

“Better than expected,” Nie Mingjue replied. “Everyone came home alive and well, though Nie Zonghui is being checked out by the healers just in case.”

“Oh?”

“A sword spirit possessed him briefly. He seems to be alright, but we wanted to double-check,” Nie Huaisang explained. “*Da-ge*, I'm going to write Wei Wuxian and send off a letter with a raven before it gets too dark, and then I'll go talk to A-Yang to see what, if any, progress was made regarding recreating the mud pools.”

Nie Mingjue reached out and curled a hand around the back of Nie Huaisang's neck, squeezing gently before letting go. “Thank you, Huaisang. We can talk more over dinner about what A-Yang may have in store for us. We'll want to reach out to Wen Qing at the very least to oversee the medical side of things. I trust our doctors, but she has the most experience with resentful energy.”

Nie Huaisang nodded, said his goodbyes, and then left to tend to his duties. Meng Yao shot Nie Mingjue an intrigued look.

“Mud pools? I thought we'd tabled that project for the time being,” he said.

“If the ones in Nightless City can help cleanse resentful energy from using the Yin Iron, then surely we can create ones here that will help cleanse the resentful energy from our sabers,” Nie Mingjue said.

“It sounds like you've got a lot to tell me.”

Nie Mingjue smiled wryly. “You have no idea.”

-/-

Wei Wuxian arrived with Lan Wangji and A-Yuan in tow a week later, A-Yuan looking bright-eyed and excited to see everyone. It was hard to believe that this was the same child who had, when he'd first arrived at the Unclean Realm, been so sickly and thin. He was now an adorable chubby-cheeked toddler who looked at the world with excitement and joy with all of his eighteen months of existence.

“*Da-shibo! Er-shibo!*” he called out when he saw Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang arriving to meet them. Nie Mingjue grinned at him, unable to resist the adorable sight of his nephew in his small set of summer-weight Lan-style robes and tiny forehead ribbon.

“A-Yuan! Look at how big you've gotten!” Nie Mingjue crouched down in front of him, meeting him on his level the best he could. “At this rate you'll grow taller than me when you grow up.”

A-Yuan's eyes went big as he imagined that. He glanced up at his fathers before launching himself forward for a hug. Nie Mingjue laughed as he rocked back on his heels, one hand spread over A-Yuan's back to steady him.

Nie Huaisang chuckled, not bothering to hide his amusement behind his fan. A-Yuan was clearly thriving having both his parents there to guide him as he grew, even with the restrictions placed on him by the Lan rules. He was happy and bright as he deserved, and the matching joy and pride on his fathers' faces showed how much the young boy meant to them.

Nie Mingjue picked up A-Yuan after making sure he was okay with it, propping him up on his hip with ease before starting off. They headed to the dining hall so they would have enough room for everyone to sit and talk, as the master masons and array masters would be there as well to lend their expertise and thoughts on the matter of the mud baths. A-Yuan was set up with some paper, a brush, and some ink so he could doodle while the rest of them talked.

Nie Yang and Mo Xuanyu were both there as well, the former making sure everything was set up properly with his *shidi* helping him where he could. The small ceremony bestowing Nie Yang with his courtesy name had taken place the prior evening, though it would take time for people to start calling him Nie Qixing. He stepped up to welcome them, a bright smile flashing across his face.

“*Wei-xiong, Lan-xiong!* And you brought my *shizhi*! Ah, I'm getting spoiled today. Did you hear? I got my courtesy name yesterday,” he said excitedly.

“Oh? And what should we address Nie-gongzi as now, then?” Lan Wangji asked.

“This one has been gifted with the name of Nie Qixing,” Nie Yang replied, bouncing on the balls of his feet in his delight.

Nie Mingjue smiled to himself at the round of congratulations that announcement rightly earned. He and Nie Huaisang had already discussed the matter, and once Nie Huaisang had married Wen Ning, Nie Yang would be named as Nie Mingjue's heir until such a time as a new blood heir was born, be that of the direct line or a secondary line. Nie Mingjue wasn't a big fan of using a surrogate to create an heir, but he would do his duty if it was necessary. Otherwise, he would just follow Nie Huaisang's lead and name Nie Zhaohui his heir when the child was eventually born.

Once the congratulations had been parceled out, the meeting began in earnest. Wen Ning had provided a copy of the plans that he'd found in the Wen archives for the array, hoping it would help them in their task. That copy was spread out over the table, the array masters poring over the schematics and getting into deeply technical conversations that Wei Wuxian, Nie Yang, and Mo

Xuanyu easily jumped into. Nie Mingjue was more than happy to allow them to do so, as while he understood arrays when they pertained to night hunts and wards, intricate ones like the one laid out before him were well beyond his purview or interest.

Only when a day trip had been made to Qishan for the ward masters and masons to look at the set-up there and everyone felt entirely comfortable trying to recreate it did work begin in one of the unused areas of the Under-Caverns, the masons sculpting out a waist-deep pool that could easily fit a half dozen men of Nie Mingjue's size inside with room to spare. They used tools and then spiritual energy to make the stone floor smooth, leaving only a little texture in order to ensure that those using the pool didn't slip and crack their heads open or worse.

At the center stood a stone pedestal with a shallow tray on top that could fit even the largest of sabers. Clever workings within the pedestal itself allowed it to be lowered with a small application of spiritual energy into key carvings, sending the saber contained within the tray below the surface of the mud. It had been the joint brainchild of Wei Wuxian and Nie Yang, brought to Nie Mingjue after a sleepless night's worth of going back and forth between the two younger men.

While the masons carved the cleanliness and temperature arrays into the four Nie guardian beasts that were to be placed in warded niches in the walls, Wen Qing and the Nie doctors worked on getting the right mixture of liquefied soil when combined with a smaller version of the setup. Mo Xuanyu eagerly threw his lot in with them, gladly fetching samples of soil from all over Qinghe as needed. They hit upon success in a sample from an area near a long-dormant volcano, one of the same range that fed the pools in Nightless City. It took six hours to get all the necessary buckets of dirt back to the Unclean Realm, Nie and Wen disciples alike ferrying the buckets back and forth, but it was worth it to see them all neatly lined up and ready to go once the masons were finished with their work and the array masters had checked everything over.

Getting the consistency of the mud just right was helped along by the activated arrays, and when the last buckets of dirt and water were added to the pool and the mud began gently bubbling and steaming, a cheer went up among those working. The true test, of course, would be the most important, and Nie Mingjue had to meditate for several hours before he felt ready to do it.

Wen Qing and the other doctors stood by to monitor as Nie Mingjue stepped into the mud pool, clad only in a pair of simple linen trousers and with his hair gathered high on his head so it didn't get in the mud. He carried Baxia flat in his hands, only setting her down when he reached the central pedestal. A small push of spiritual energy saw the tray sink just below the surface of the mud, Baxia's usually shining blade and hilt immediately becoming coated. Nie Mingjue let his hands rest on either side of the tray, watching in stomach-twisting anticipation as inky black tendrils of resentful energy began steaming out of the mud.

Off to one side and well out of the way, Lan Xichen was stationed at a low table, Nie Huaisang and Meng Yao on either side of him. Lan Xichen's guqin sat on the table before him, ready to be played if *Cleansing* was a necessary part of the ritual as it had been with Wei Wuxian and the Seal. Said cultivator was spending the time with his family, as while he desperately wanted to be there, he'd been worried his affinity for resentful energy might interfere with the ritual. Neither Nie Mingjue nor Wen Qing thought it would, but they'd both agreed it would be better not to have Wei Wuxian worrying about it when his husband and son could easily distract him.

When a half-hour had passed, Wen Qing called a halt to the ritual. Nie Mingjue retrieved Baxia from the tray before turning himself over to the tender mercies of the assembled medical staff. He

certainly felt better after being in the mud, if not a bit squishy in places that shouldn't squish, but a hot bath with clean water and his preferred scented oils would take care of that issue handily.

"How do you feel?" Wen Qing asked as she sent a thread of spiritual energy through his meridians. "How is your bond with Baxia?"

Nie Mingjue closed his eyes and focused on the bond he had with his saber, a thoughtful hum leaving him. "Better. Less... heavy, if that makes sense. She feels less like a tiger waiting to pounce at any moment and more like a watchful one. Still wary, still alert, but not predatory."

"Good. Another session should see even more improvement, but that can wait until tomorrow or the next day," Wen Qing announced. "Your spiritual energy seems to be moving through your meridians more easily as well. I'll want you to be careful with how you use it in the coming days, especially after the second session. If Wei Wuxian's experience is anything to go by, you'll likely sleep hard after each treatment. I don't know if it'll be easier or harder with your ancestors' sabers, but we'll go one at a time with those and space out the cleansings so you have enough rest. If the saber spirits agree, perhaps you can share the burden of the cleansings with your brother."

Nie Mingjue did his best to bow to her from his seated position, but Wen Qing caught him before he could go too low. "Ah, none of that," she said. "We'll be family soon enough. Besides, you look like you're about to fall asleep on me, and I think several people in this room would have words to say about that."

"I'll need a bath first before anything else," Nie Mingjue muttered as he got to his feet. One of the doctors handed him an inner robe so he could at least be provided some modesty. Nie Mingjue usually wouldn't have cared, but the mud had made the pants cling to his body rather closely and there were some things he only wanted Meng Yao and Lan Xichen to see, so he took the robe and fastened it around himself before going in search of a bath.

Getting the ancestral sabers cleansed took several months all told. They started with the oldest and then went down the line from there. It was fascinating to see the small differences in the various sabers that the clan leaders who had gone before him had favored, as well as heartbreaking to see just how many there were given their wielders' shorter than usual lives. The hardest one to see was also the last. The broken pieces of their father's saber were just as difficult to look at as they had been when they'd been sealed away in the ancestral hall.

Nie Mingjue handled the cleansing for that one himself, only allowing two of the Nie doctors in the cavern to watch over him as the shards were lowered beneath the surface of the mud. As he and Nie Huaisang had with the others, he sent up a prayer to the heavens in the hopes that their father's spirit would be pleased with what they were doing and that it would find some rest in knowing that his killer was thoroughly dead and his blade was being seen to and respected by his sons. When the cleansing was finished, Nie Mingjue cleaned and oiled the pieces of the saber until they gleamed in the light of the many candles illuminating the new addition to the ancestral hall that had been built just for the sabers.

He placed the pieces in the display case one by one, making sure they were in the correct spots before activating the protective ward that would keep people from touching it and from rust setting into the blade. At the front of the case was a small tablet; on the right side was the saber's name, Chaofeng, and on the left was its bearer's name, Nie Qiangbao. All the other sabers had similar tablets, ensuring that they would be properly remembered and venerated in the coming years, just as they always should have been.

The ancestral hall on Xinglu Ridge was carefully rid of its half-formed fierce corpses, each being dispatched and then properly laid to rest in the hall itself. The enchantment on the walls was removed well before work began, and once the last fierce corpse was properly seen to, the hall was firmly sealed and warded once more against would-be thieves and desecration. Just because those buried there weren't of Nie blood didn't mean that they weren't worth protecting, after all. If anything, they deserved to be honored for everything they'd been put through after their deaths. It was the least the Nie could do.

The bond Nie Mingjue shared with Baxia felt as clean and light as it had been when he'd first allowed his saber to taste his blood when he was twelve. While Baxia didn't speak in distinct words, Nie Mingjue could more clearly feel her moods as the days went on. It was astounding to think that this was what he and other Nies had been missing, and he was intensely grateful that they'd been able to find a solution for the problem that had hounded their clan for so long.

-/-

Nie Huaisang stepped off his blade and made his way up the stairs leading up to Koi Tower, humming happily to himself. He was technically visiting on official business, but he wasn't going to miss out on seeing Jin Ling and spending some time with his nephew. A playful early autumn breeze blew at the hems of his robes as he was escorted by a servant along the paths to an open pavilion near the sect leader's private quarters, the faint chill in the air warning of the colder months soon to come. Much to his surprise and delight, Jiang Cheng was there, as were Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli, the former of whom had Jin Ling carefully propped up on his lap.

"Xiongzhang! Sao-zi! Cheng-di! I wasn't expecting both my brothers to be here," Nie Huaisang said as he stepped into the pavilion. "And of course, I'm very happy to see A-Ling as well."

Jiang Yanli laughed. "He'll be very spoiled to have both uncles here today," she agreed. "Come, sit. Your message this morning was rather brief."

Nie Huaisang took a seat at the table they were all gathered around, his robes pooling neatly around him. "Oh, no need to worry," he assured her. "It's happy news, I promise."

"Oh?" Jin Zixuan arched an eyebrow curiously. "And?"

"Ah! The matchmakers have finally settled on an auspicious date for *da-ge*, Yao-ge, and Xichen-ge's wedding," Nie Huaisang announced, drawing out an invitation from his sleeve and handing it over to Jiang Yanli. "I was going to head to Lotus Pier next to deliver the one for your family, Cheng-di, but since you're here, I might as well give it to you."

He did just that, Jiang Cheng tucking it away in his own sleeve so Jin Ling didn't try to grab at it.

"I'll make sure it gets to my mother and father," he said. "Did you really come all the way to Lanling just to act as messenger?"

"Well, I did want to see A-Ling," Nie Huaisang admitted with a laugh, "but that was only a happy benefit. The date is set for a few weeks after Qingming. The etiquette masters had to go delving into our records to see what the protocol was for such a wedding, as when my mother married my father and *da-ge*'s mother, the latter two were already married to one another. Apparently the ceremony is a little different when all three spouses-to-be are coming in without any prior marriages."

“And what about yours?” Jin Zixuan asked. “Has that been decided?”

“Mm, not quite. The matchmakers are still debating over whether it'd be better to have a fall or winter wedding,” Nie Huaisang said with a sigh. “They wanted to have at least a season between *da-ge* and I getting married so the cost wouldn't be too bad, not to mention apparently that they can't find any good dates in the summer.” He shrugged. “Honestly, I'll just be glad when they finally pick a date and we can move forward with everything. I'll miss living in the Unclean Realm and seeing *da-ge* every day, but Qinghe's a short flight away from Qishan, so it's not like we'll be separated forever.”

“You're not the only one the matchmakers are having issues with,” Jiang Cheng grumbled. “All of the women they've presented me with so far have less between their ears than a rabbit.”

“A-Cheng!” Jiang Yanli chided gently. “Be kind.”

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes. “Fine, fine. Some of them are smarter than a rabbit, but not by much. I have another meeting in a few days with the second daughter of the Tingshan He clan, He Baiyu.”

Nie Huaisang hummed thoughtfully. “Tingshan He don't suffer fools well, and I doubt their daughters would be raised to be little more than ornamental beauties, if I may be so blunt,” he said. “I wish you luck, Cheng-*di*.”

“I'll need it,” Jiang Cheng said, idly bouncing Jin Ling on his knee.

“Oh, I don't know,” Nie Huaisang said with a mischievous smile. “Just show up with A-Ling there on your knee and you'll win them over in no time.”

Jiang Cheng puffed up like an affronted cat at that, much as Nie Huaisang thought he would. “What, you think I can't win someone over with my own charm?” he asked as his sister hid a laugh behind a sleeve.

“I never said that,” Nie Huaisang replied. “I just thought that you might want some extra help, that's all. A-Ling is a great distraction and might help to break the ice, so to speak.”

Jiang Cheng huffed. “I can do it on my own!”

“Prove it, then,” Nie Huaisang challenged.

“I will!”

Nie Huaisang sat back in victory, feeling highly amused and pleased with himself. His teasing bore fruit several weeks later, or so it seemed, because when he attended a discussion conference in Lotus Pier, Jiang Cheng was seated next to a young woman about their age that Nie Huaisang could only assume was He Baiyu. The two of them appeared to be getting along, if the way they were deep in conversation during some of the breaks was anything to go by.

From what Nie Huaisang's intelligence network had told him, He Baiyu was an intelligent young woman with a good cultivation base, a quick tongue, and an even quicker mind. She wasn't the kind of person to back down without a fight when it was important, but she also knew the value of keeping her opinion to herself if necessary. All in all, Nie Huaisang couldn't imagine someone better suited to be the next Madam of Lotus Pier.

It was heartbreaking to know that she had been pointlessly murdered in the prior timeline due to Jin Guangshan wiping out her entire clan in his rise to becoming Chief Cultivator. If she hadn't, perhaps Jiang Cheng wouldn't have spent so long unmarried and alone at Lotus Pier as he grieved his family. He'd had children in the end, of course, in order to secure his bloodline, but he hadn't married for love like he'd wanted.

Still, there was no need to worry about that. He Baiyu was alive now and hitting it off with Jiang Cheng, and that was all that mattered. And if it made Jiang Cheng happy and kept Madam Yu off his back in regards to finding a wife, then so much the better.

The discussion conference went relatively well, all things considered. That was, until the last night and the farewell banquet was taking place. The night was moving nicely apace and Nie Huaisang was enjoying a dish of perfectly spiced fish when there was a commotion at the entrance to the banquet hall. He looked up to see Jin Zixun staggering into the hall, tearing free of the guards at the door.

“NIE HUAISANG!”

Nie Huaisang blinked, surprised. Even without the attempts to grab him by the guards, Jin Zixun looked distinctly rumpled and out of sorts. Nie Huaisang hadn't had the chance to see him in the prior timeline before he'd died at Qiongqi Path, but he had little doubt he looked just as unhinged as he had then. He laid a hand on Nie Mingjue's arm, stopping him from getting up.

“I want to see what he wants,” he murmured so that only his brother could hear. Nie Mingjue shot him a wary look and then nodded minutely, his entire body tense with preparation for a fight.

“Jin Zixun,” Nie Huaisang said, flicking Lengfeng open and fanning himself lazily. “What brings you all the way to Lotus Pier, and in such a... disagreeable state?”

“You cursed me!”

Nie Huaisang arched an eyebrow. “Did I? Jin Zixun, if I wanted you dead, you'd already *be* dead. Besides, I can't be bothered to mess around with curses. That's not my style.”

“I know it was you!” Jin Zixun shouted. “It's to pay me back for shooting you at the Crowd Hunt!”

“That was well over two years ago,” Nie Huaisang pointed out. “Why would I wait to curse you for so long? Not to mention worrying about you has been so far down on my list of things to do that it ranks right after worrying if the sun will continue to rise each day. Out of curiosity, what have you been cursed with?”

“The Hundred Holes Curse,” Jin Zixun ground out, “which you would *know* since you cast it.”

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes before snapping his fan shut and getting to his feet. “I would suggest you start looking to others who you might've angered,” he said, stepping around the table, “because I had nothing to do with this. Whoever cast the curse likely has an echo of it on their own body. If you like, we can call for the Jiang doctors to examine me for that echo. I would suggest Wen-yisheng or Wen-zongzhu since they both have the proper training, but something tells me that you won't accept that, Jin-gongzi. Once the matter is cleared up, I would suggest you leave Lotus Pier, unless you want to continue to shame your sect and clan with the way you're acting and be banned from the resident grounds of a *third* Great Sect.”

That only served to enrage Jin Zixun further. He surged forward, his anger overriding what little sense of judgment he had left. Nie Huaisang dodged lightly around him, almost skipping out of the way and leaving Jin Zixun to barrel almost directly into Nie Mingjue, who caught hold of him, turned him around, and then forced him to his knees, Baxia's blade hovering at his throat under her own power.

“Jin-*zongzhu*, kindly take care of your cousin before we claim right of retribution,” Nie Mingjue snapped out. “We have every right to, and are only refraining from doing so because he's clearly not in his right mind, not to mention I'd rather not spill blood on Jiang-*zongzhu*'s floor.”

“Of course,” Jin Zixuan said, rising to his feet from behind his own table. He gestured for some of his disciples to follow him. Nie Huaisang only relaxed when Jin Zixun had been manhandled out of the banquet hall, retaking his seat at his table like nothing had happened.

“Did you know that was going to happen?” Nie Mingjue asked quietly after sitting down next to him once more.

Nie Huaisang shook his head. “No clue. I'm just as surprised as you are, *da-ge*.”

“How'd you know I'd be there?”

That earned a quiet huff of disbelief. “Please. At the angle he was going, he would've either crashed into you or the wall. Either way, he wasn't going very far, not to mention he hadn't even bothered drawing his sword,” Nie Huaisang retorted, picking up his chopsticks in preparation of returning to his briefly abandoned meal. “While he was a threat, he wasn't any more of one than one of our smallest disciples. To be honest, they probably could've beaten him with their practice swords and one hand behind their backs. The curse seemed... particularly far along given his mental state.”

Nie Mingjue hummed. “Do you think-”

“That troublemaker has been keeping to himself, surprisingly enough,” Nie Huaisang murmured. “No, I don't think it was him. He's not shown any signs of the curse echo, anyways. My people would've told me if he had.”

The remainder of the banquet passed without incident, Jin Zixuan returning a half hour after he'd left. Jin Zixun had been bundled off to Koi Tower bound and knocked unconscious, as he'd been too volatile to handle flying by sword otherwise. When Nie Huaisang joined Wen Ning, Jiang Cheng, and some of their other friends for a quiet after-banquet drinking session, it was to find his sworn brother talking excitedly about how he'd seen He Baiyu palm a rather wicked looking dagger from inside her sleeve in case Jin Zixun decided to come their way, and how much better he felt about knowing she was capable and willing to defend herself without having to rely entirely on others.

While he didn't think it was love quite yet, Nie Huaisang was happy to see Jiang Cheng actually looking forward to spending time with He Baiyu, and hoped it boded well for the future. He leaned in against Wen Ning, letting the conversation flow over him like the river going by outside. Life was good, and it could only get better from there.

Lots of new names this chapter! As always, if I've either a) messed something up or b) created an abomination of a name, please let me know so I can fix it:

秋星 -Qiuxing, Autumn Star, Nie Yang's courtesy name

强豹 -Qiangbao, Strong Leopard, Nie-dad's courtesy name

睚眦 - Yazi- a creature that likes to fight, is aggressive and is normally found on cross-guards on sword as ornaments. One of the nine sons of the dragon.

嘲風 - Chaofeng- a creature that likes to adventure. They are typically placed on the four corners of roofs. One of the nine sons of the dragon.

Both a call back to Baxia being one of the nine sons of the dragon.

何白玉 - He Baiyu , White Jade, third daughter of the Tingshan He Clan. Originally killed when the rest of the Tingshan He Clan was wiped out by Lanling Jin on Jin Guangshan's orders in the canon timeline.

This Could Really Be a Good Life

Chapter Notes

Woo, this monster of a fic is done! Did I give everyone a happily ever after? Yes, because they heckin' deserve it given what canon dumped on them. Did I give characters who I've written as being somewhere on the ace-spectrum bio kids? Yes, because ace people can want and have kids too, y'know. Will I be playing in this 'verse again? Eh, probably not, as I feel it's pretty neatly wrapped up. However, I've greatly enjoyed going on this adventure with you all, and have loved seeing your reactions to it.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The preparations for the wedding between Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, and Meng Yao took up much of the autumn and winter, providing plenty of work for many of the craftspeople in Qinghe and Gusu during that time. A major sect leader's wedding was usually a grand affair and required plenty of work, and a wedding between two sect leaders and their shared consort even more so. Mo Meifen had taken over the budget on the Nie side, refusing to allow Meng Yao to worry himself over it.

Nie Mingjue was starting to get tired of being measured and asked about minute details about decorations and other things. He breathed a sigh of relief when the day finally came. Nie Huaisang helped him to get dressed, making sure each layer of his robes was wrinkle-free and hanging correctly. If a few tears were shed by either brother, well, whatever happened in those private precious moments before the wedding began stayed there.

The first half of the ceremony took place in the Cloud Recesses, with Meng Yao and Nie Mingjue offering tea to the Lan elders and Lan Qiren, taking their first set of bows in the ancestral hall there. The full wedding party flew to Qinghe after that, flying in a formation that showed off the vibrant red of their robes. Raucous cheers and calls of good-wishes met them when they landed outside the gates of the Unclean Realm, something that had Nie Mingjue laughing.

When the three of them straightened up from their final set of bows, they shared jubilant smiles with one another before going to the celebratory feast. In Nie Mingjue's opinion, the wedding ceremony was a far more preferable one than the tension-filled sworn brother ceremony they'd shared in his previous life. That time felt like a distant dream now.

As he took his seat at the head table with his husbands on either side of him and the happy faces of the guests in the hall, Nie Mingjue was quite happy to let the past firmly stay where it was. He was well aware that he'd still have trouble in this new life, but it certainly helped that he wasn't going it alone, and that made all the difference in the world.

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When it came time for their own wedding, Wen Ning and Nie Huaisang were spared only some of the intensity that had come with Nie Mingjue's. After the wedding feast was over and they were finally in their quarters for the night, Wen Ning couldn't help but feel relieved that they wouldn't

personally have to go through that again. He began to carefully remove the ornate headpiece, eager to let his hair hang freely.

“Here, let me,” Nie Huaisang offered. Wen Ning took a seat on a chair and gratefully surrendered himself to his husband's attention, sighing with relief when the headpiece was finally free of his hair and the tension released. He leaned back into Nie Huaisang's hands, eyes fluttering shut as gentle fingers rubbed at his scalp.

“If you keep doing that, I'm going to fall asleep right here and now,” he said. Nie Huaisang laughed before leaning in and brushing a kiss against the top of Wen Ning's head.

“Come now, husband, surely you'll want to get undressed first,” he teased. Wen Ning hummed, reaching up to catch hold of one of Nie Huaisang's hands in his.

“Will you help me?”

“Of course.”

They took their time removing the many layers they each wore, setting the ornate robes aside later for cleaning and storage. When they were both finally free of their formal wear and in clothes better suited for sleep, Wen Ning drew Nie Huaisang close and kissed him soft and slow. Nie Huaisang returned the kiss with equal fervor, content to not rush things.

As the kiss ended, Wen Ning felt the excitement and adrenaline of the day flood out of him with all the subtlety of a brick to the head. He felt a little bad stepping a half pace away from Nie Huaisang, but it was the only way he could properly cover his mouth as he yawned.

“I'm sorry. I know you probably wanted to celebrate properly, but I'm exhausted,” he said, glancing over at the red-decorated bed with a lopsided smile. Nie Huaisang shook his head.

“No need to apologize. We'll have plenty of time to celebrate later,” he said. “Let's get some sleep and then we'll revisit it in the morning.”

“You have the best ideas,” Wen Ning murmured sleepily as he followed Nie Huaisang to the bed.

“Most of the time,” his husband agreed, tugging down the covers. “In you get.”

Wen Ning wrapped himself around Nie Huaisang once the candles had been taken care of and the both of them were properly comfortable, tucking him close to his chest. Nie Huaisang settled in, seeming quite happy to use him as a pillow.

“Sleep well, A-Ning.”

Wen Ning hummed in agreement, already half-asleep as it was with his husband's warm body sprawled over his.

“You too, A-Sang.”

-/-

Time, Wen Qing found, was an odd and fickle thing. It was kind and cruel all in the same breath, wiping away past failures while allowing memorials to great shames and evils to live on for far too long. She found it strange to think that at this time in the prior timeline, four short years after the

Sunshot Campaign had ended, she, Wen Ning, and Nie Mingjue had all been dead and Nie Huaisang thrust into a role he'd never wanted.

Now, though, now she was alive and thriving, as was her family. The Wen clan was strong once more, headed by her brother and Nie Huaisang. A-Yuan was as happy as he could be, his fathers guiding him with fond hands toward perhaps an even better life than he'd had before. Certainly one filled with less pain, all things considered.

The world seemed to be a kinder place in general, though there would always be troubles. Wen Qing certainly hadn't expected to find such a quiet and gentle love as she had with Mo Meifen. They had no plans to get married, not yet, but they were living quite happily in the Unclean Realm together and very few people complained about it. Mo Xuanyu was one of their most ardent supporters, quite happily telling everyone who would listen that he had two amazing mothers and rarely mentioned his father.

Wen Qing found it sweet and didn't bother correcting him. She was just glad he was old enough to be able to protect himself should anyone try to say anything. Nie Qiuxing was fiercely protective of Mo Xuanyu, just as he was of many of his younger sect siblings, and often would back him up even though there was only two years' difference between them. Wen Qing was doubly glad that Nie Qiuxing's more... murderous tendencies had been redirected very early on, leading to a very fine young man who had been appointed as one of the head disciples after Nie Huaisang had left for Qishan.

Both young men worked well with their fellow sect members, passing on the tenacious spirit that had been instilled in them when they were young. Wen Qing highly approved, even if it did mean that she and the other Nie doctors had to deal with more training accidents than most sect doctors. As long as the injuries weren't life threatening, she was happy.

Sometimes, though, Wen Qing found herself wondering if she and the others who had traveled back in time weren't going to reap heavier consequences for their actions than they already had. Who knew what sort of things would happen because someone lived when they had died or vice versa? For example, she'd heard strong rumors of a new sect being formed in the south-west that accepted all who could form a golden core rather than focusing on bloodlines.

She hadn't heard what it was officially called, though rumor had it that a nickname for it was the Liangxue, or Bright Snow, sect, so called because of the new ideals and ideas that it was trying to bring to the cultivation world. Whatever its name was, Wen Qing wished them the best. She'd made notes to keep an ear out in case they ever got representatives from the new sect, as having an alliance with them could prove beneficial.

Wen Qing set down her ink brush, having finished with her work for the day, and went in search of her lover and son, finding the two of them in one of the flower gardens that had been so carefully curated to withstand the mountainous environment. She took a seat on the bench next to Mo Meifen, simply enjoying the slowly cooling evening air and the stories Mo Xuanyu was telling of the latest escapades some of the younger disciples had gotten up to. She'd take what peace she could get, and if the future came knocking for payment for the borrowed time, she and the others would meet its demands head-on.

-/-

Nie Huaisang could hardly believe it, but he'd checked the date several times and it had yet to change. He watched with pride as Mo Xuanyu and Nie Qiuxing checked over their charges. It was

the first night hunt for many of the juniors gathered there. There was a healthy mixture of various sects, and not just the Great ones, either. He stood next to Wen Ning with a pleased smile, noting that Jin Ling, Lan Sizhui (so named this time around as a nod towards never meeting his birth parents), Ouyang Zizhen, and Lan Jingyi were all present and accounted for near the front of the group.

Their eldest, Wen Qingtian, was standing nearby, still looking quite put out that he couldn't join in on the night hunt due to his young age. He was all of twelve, having been born with his twin sister, Wen Xiyu, from the joining of a surrogate mother and Wen Ning. Nie Huaisang had understood the necessity of it, but he hadn't been fond of the thought of sharing his husband with someone else, no matter how temporarily. He and Wen Ning had agreed that they would adopt if they wanted any further children since they now had blood heirs, though that had yet to happen.

Nie Mingjue was more than happy to act as one of the fun uncles and spoil the twins rotten, something that amused Nie Huaisang to no end. Not that either of them had any shortage of nephews and nieces, blood-related or otherwise, to spoil. Jin Ling, for example, had gained four siblings over the years, with the eldest of his siblings born two years after him and the youngest just four years ago. Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli had turned out to be every bit the wonderful parents Nie Huaisang had always thought they would be in either timeline, and Koi Tower was certainly a livelier place with all the children inhabiting it. It was safer, too, as Jin Zixuan had worked hard to root out as many of his father's cronies and sycophants as he could.

Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, and Meng Yao had two sons of their own, the former two having worked with surrogates as well to provide a blood legacy for their clans. Lan Yahui and Nie Chunlin were both ten years old, with Lan Yahui being a few months older than his brother. Nie Huaisang loved his nephews, especially when he saw Nie Mingjue being just as soft and sweet with them as he still was with him. He was very glad the boys would never have to know the fear of losing any of their parents to a saber-induced *qi*-deviation like far too many of the Nie clan had.

Wen Qing and Mo Meifen hadn't had any further children of their own, adoptive or otherwise, though they had gotten married a few years ago much to Mo Xuanyu's delight. Both Nie Huaisang and Wen Ning had treated Mo Meifen as family for years by that point, so it was really just a formality when everything was said and done.

Jiang Cheng and He Baiyu had married as well and had two daughters and a son together, the eldest of whom would be his heir when Jiang Fengmian eventually stepped down as clan leader or died. Nie Huaisang was happy that his sworn brother had found love and peace, especially when the prior timeline had seemed determined to rip it out of his hands at every given possibility.

"Alright, everyone," Mo Xuanyu called out above the general chatter of the juniors in front of him, "listen up! Wen-zongzhu has graciously allowed us to have this night hunt here in Qishan. You are to be respectful to anyone we may encounter, even if they don't extend the same courtesy to you. Just because we're cultivators doesn't mean that we don't have manners or that we're better than everyone else, got it? I don't care what sect you're from; if I hear or see that you've acted poorly toward anyone or put others in unnecessary danger, you'll be dealing with myself and Nie-xiong on the training grounds, and trust me, you do *not* want to deal with that. Am I understood?"

There was a general cry of "Yes, Senior Mo!" or "Understood!" from the juniors, something that had Mo Xuanyu nodding in satisfaction.

“Good.” He turned to Wen Ning and Nie Huaisang before dropping into a salute, his sword held between his clasped hands. “Thank you for allowing us to hunt on your lands, Wen-zongzhu, Wen-pei’ou.”

They returned the salute with matching ones of their own, Nie Huaisang unable to hide an amused smile as he straightened up.

“You’re more than welcome,” Wen Ning replied. He looked over the assembled juniors. “Be safe. We’ll watch the skies for any flares should you need help. When the hunt is over, you are all welcome to return to Eclipse Manor to rest and recover before you return home.”

“We’ll see you soon, everyone. Swift hunting and remember what you’ve been taught,” Nie Huaisang added. “Now get out of here before the gate guards get bored of keeping the gates open.”

He watched the hunters leave through the gate, chuckling when several of them waved goodbye. He returned the waves, his fan flashing in the morning light. When the last of the juniors was gone, Nie Huaisang turned to his family.

“So,” he said, “shall we go find Xiyu and see what she’s gotten up to?”

Wen Ning sighed. “If she’s blown up anything else-”

“-we would’ve heard it,” Nie Huaisang said, tucking his hand into the crook of his husband’s elbow. “Besides, Xuanyu fixed the wards on her workshop and-”

He paused when there was a muffled explosion in the distance followed by pale yellow smoke that had silver sparks shimmering within it.

Wen Qingtian cocked his head. “Huh. The sparkles are new.”

“Hopefully your sister isn’t sparkly as well,” Nie Huaisang said dryly, putting his free hand on his son’s shoulder as they started walking.

Having to deal with explosions wasn’t exactly how he’d pictured spending his adult life, but given what he’d already experienced, Nie Huaisang decided he’d rather deal with the mostly harmless aftermath of Wei Wuxian’s teaching legacy than betrayal and bloodshed.

That, he figured, was well worth it.

Chapter End Notes

Names:

Wen Qingtian - 晴天 - Sunny day (the Qing character, while sounding similar, is different from the one used in Wen Qing’s name (情).

Wen Xiyu - 稀玉 - rare jade

Lan Yahui - 雅惠 - elegant/graceful favor/benefit

Nie Chunlin -春林 - spring forest

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